

原作:AIC
志真元

バブルガム クライシス
Bubblegum Crisis

超鋼守護天使

ハードメタル・ガーディアンズ



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朝日
ノベルズ



Hard Metal Guardians:
Bubblegum Crisis - Super Steel Guardian
Angel

By Hajime Shima

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For more: visit tenchimuyotranslationblog.blogspot.com

Book Summary:

(Spoilers! Only read if you're too lazy to read the actual book)

Chapter 1:

Detective Leon Rokuhara pursues a monstrous runaway Boomer that has fused with a heavy SUV along the Metropolitan Expressway. Despite a direct hit from Leon's heavy rifle, the mechanical beast veers off the road and plummets through the roof of a live house located directly beneath the tracks. Inside, seventeen-year-old rock artist Priss Asagiri is in the middle of her debut performance. As the venue falls into chaos, Priss takes a stand to protect her junior, Nene Rokuhara, using her expensive guitar as a makeshift club to smash the creature's head.

Just as the Boomer begins to regenerate and corners the girls, two mysterious women clad in high-tech "Dress Suits" descend from the shadows. One warrior uses a rapier and the other a sonic-speed bow to shred the Boomer into scrap. After retrieving the creature's core, they strictly warn Priss to forget the encounter and vanish.

Chapter 2:

The following morning, the police release an official cover-up story claiming the Boomer simply self-destructed due to the crash. Priss attempts to stick to this script, but her efforts are undermined by Nene, who enthusiastically tells their classmates that Priss is a heroic "Boomer Slayer." This leads to a tense and embarrassing morning at school, where Nene begins treating Priss with an overly familiar, sisterly affection that frustrates the rocker.

Meanwhile, at the AD. POLICE headquarters, Leon is forced into a new partnership with Silva, an advanced "Investigation Support Boomer" with a human appearance. Despite Leon's deep-seated hatred for all Boomers, his chief uses a display of force to ensure the detective accepts his new mechanical partner.

In a secret facility, the two armored warriors are revealed to be Sylia Stingray and Linna Yamazaki . Their analysis of the retrieved core uncovers a terrifying evolution in Boomer technology that allows machines to assimilate any metal object, including military warships.

They also identify Priss and Nene as key individuals who somehow interfered with the Boomer's functions.

Back in the city, Priss and Nene wander the shopping district in search of lunch after Nene accidentally causes Priss to miss out on a limited-run meal at a local restaurant. As they walk, Priss finds herself unable to truly stay angry at the bubbly and persistent junior who survived the nightmare by her side.

Leon Rokuhara, an AD-Police officer, drives toward a research facility with his new partner Silva, a specialized investigative Boomer. Despite Silva's protests regarding efficiency, Leon insists on a detour to a local butcher shop to check on his sister, Nene, who survived a recent Boomer attack. At the shop, Leon encounters the rebellious rock singer Priss Asagiri. They have a wrestling match over who gets to eat the last beef croquettes the restaurant has.

Chapter 3:

Meanwhile, at the massive Genom City pyramid in Marunouchi, the enigmatic Mason Childes watches private footage of Priss's debut concert. He reveals himself as a cold mastermind who orchestrated the Boomer rampage at her show as a field test for a new "Zombie Virus" nanomachine. He finds beauty in the intersection of rock music and impulsive destruction, intending to use this technology to reignite Boomer-led terrorism against society.

As Priss and Nene attempt to cycle home, they are suddenly intercepted by a high-end, six-wheeled Bentley limousine. Mechanical arms emerge from the vehicle, snatching the girls and their bicycles off the street. Inside the car, they meet the refined Sylia Stingray and her maid, Linna. Sylia makes a startling proposal, asking the girls to become "allies of justice."

Simultaneously, Leon and Silva reach a high-tech research lab in Chofu to meet Claire Shinohara, a brilliant scientist and Leon's former flame. Claire confirms that the rogue Boomer was infected by a terrifyingly advanced nanomachine that overwrites AI logic, turning machines into violent monsters. Leon learns that the secret project to build Silva was the very thing that drove him and Claire apart. As evening falls, the Bentley carrying Priss and Nene descends into a deep, high-security underground facility.

Priss and her new associates gather at the music café Moby Dick, where her foster father Gozo serves them spicy beef sinew curry. Amidst a tense but domestic atmosphere, Meiei formally introduces himself as the producer for the group, revealing that Sylia intends for them to form a band with Priss at the center. Despite Priss's vocal protests about the others being total amateurs, the plan moves forward. To equip the group, they travel to Akihabara to visit

a high-end vintage shop called "Burn." There, Nene stubbornly chooses a rare 1981 Flying V bass while Priss finds a Randy V guitar equipped with a specialized robotic tuning system. Priss begrudgingly agrees to train the clumsy Nene, unaware that the shop's owner, Roberto, is secretly a black-market dealer of illegal Boomer parts.

Nearby, AD Police officers Leon and Silva arrive at the same shop, following a lead on illegal components found in recent rogue Boomers. Their investigation is violently interrupted when a high-end "companion" Boomer in the shop's basement spontaneously goes rogue. The machine absorbs surrounding metal and other units, transforming into a multi-limbed monstrosity that bursts through the floor of the music shop above. Chaos erupts as the building begins to collapse. Leon orders everyone to flee, but Priss realizes she cannot simply run while civilians are in danger. Against Sylia's orders to retreat, Priss activates her "Dress Suit"; a high-tech, gothic-lolita-styled combat under-suit that enhances her physical strength and speed.

Priss engages the monster in hand-to-hand combat, using her agility to counter its massive weight. However, the Boomer's regenerative capabilities allow it to absorb a nearby vehicle, granting it even greater mass and mobility. As Leon runs out of ammunition and Priss struggles to find a finishing blow, a mysterious sniper from a distant rooftop begins pinning the beast to the asphalt with sonic-speed metal arrows. Seizing the moment, Silva grabs a high-voltage underground cable and plunges it into the creature. A massive arc of electricity incinerates the Boomer's organic parts, ending the threat but leaving Silva charred and smoking. Leon rushes to his fallen partner's side, while Priss watches in shock, fully realizing for the first time that the detective's companion is a Boomer.

Priss stands in awe of the detective's partner, a Boomer named Sylva, who sacrifices himself to protect the city and his human comrades. She realizes that despite being a machine, Sylva displays more humanity than most people. Linna, clad in a powerful Hard Suit, urges Priss to escape the chaotic scene at the docks before the authorities regain control. The two women retreat to a dim, candlelit maid cafe called Triple☆A, where Nene joins them. As a massive blackout grips Akihabara due to the destruction of the power lines, the group reunites with Sylva and the stoic Meiei. Sylva reprimands Priss for her recklessness, but her scolding is interrupted by her grandmother, Kimie Sakakibara, who humbles both women by demanding they treat each other as comrades rather than employer and employee.

Meanwhile, Leon Rokuhara takes the charred remains of Sylva to a clandestine workshop run by a dealer named Roberto. Risking his career and criminal charges, Leon repairs his partner in secret to prevent the AD Police from scrapping him. Once rebooted, Sylva expresses his gratitude, though Leon dismisses the sentiment with his typical gruffness. Days later, the Knight Sabers begin their official band training at a luxurious underground studio hidden beneath a commercial building. Priss, acting as a strict mentor, hauls a reluctant Nene to practice. While they bond over music and Linna's baking, the looming threat of Genom

remains, as the corporation's president, Mason Quincy, monitors their activities from his high-rise tower in Marunouchi.

The peace is shattered when Meiei informs the group of a trapped AD Police unit at the Yokosuka docks. The Knight Sabers deploy in their advanced Hard Suits to rescue Leon and Sylva from a monstrous, tiger-like Boomer. During the fierce battle, the Boomer undergoes a horrific transformation, fusing with a massive crane to become a gargantuan weaponized entity. Facing certain defeat, Nene finds her courage and activates a secret "Black Crystal" weapon. Through a synchronized attack with Priss, they penetrate the Boomer's core with a molecular spear, causing the machine to dissolve from the inside out. In its final moments, the Boomer's murderous intent vanishes, leaving Nene with a sense of pity for it. Watching from afar, Mason Quincy realizes the Knight Sabers possess the long-lost B-Crystal technology and accepts their challenge. The end.

Character Profiles:



- Priss Asagiri
She's a high school student and a professional-level rock artist. As soon as footage of her performing is posted online, hits flood in, and she becomes an instant celebrity.
- Nene Rokuhara
She's an ordinary high school student who seems to be the very picture of easygoing happiness. She becomes friends with Priss after meeting her during a Boomer rampage incident. There appears to be a secret regarding her upbringing.
- Leon
He's the older brother of Nene Rokuhara and a detective for "AD. POLICE," the Metropolitan Police Department's armed division for countering Boomers.

Chapter 1: Battle of Queen

The police vehicle hurtled forward, drawing massive power from a combination of onboard batteries and a non-contact power supply via emergency overhead lines installed beneath the Metropolitan Expressway's surface. The motor groaned under a high load, pushed to the very brink of burning out from over-rotation. Moving at 187 kilometers per hour, Leon Rokuhara glared at the runaway Boomer, which was steadily growing larger in his sights.

"I've caught you!"

As he drew closer, the details of its form became clear. There was no longer any trace of its former self, a large-displacement SUV. Its surface possessed a wet luster, and upon closer inspection, it was pulsing as if it were alive. The organic material meant to mimic human skin had scraped away, leaving the metallic hide exposed. Along the heavy weaponry attached to the arms sprouting from its back, string-like bulges reminiscent of blood vessels or nerve fibers ran in a web-like pattern.

Leon twisted his lips into a grimace as he realized why the opponent wasn't attacking. The fusion had progressed too far; even the bullets and rocket shells inside the vehicle had become part of its body.

Gunfire or shelling would likely have caused that Boomer a sensation of pain as literal as cutting its own flesh.

...There was an old movie with a monster robot like this, wasn't there?

He searched his memories for something he had seen on cable TV as a child, but the title eluded him. He distorted his cheeks. This was no time for such thoughts. This was reality. It was different from movies or novels. A single moment of laxity would lead directly to death.

The grotesque runaway Boomer, with a humanoid upper body protruding from its hood, was right there. Leon fixed the throttle. Resisting the wind pressure that threatened to blow him away, he twisted his body and leveled the anti-materiel rifle he had been carrying on his back. It was a new-era rifle with a 20mm caliber and a total weight of 25 kilograms, developed on the premise that the shooter would be wearing a reinforced exoskeleton with power-assist.

He caught the runaway Boomer's wheels in the sights. Regulating his breathing, he quietly rested his finger on the trigger. He muttered, half as a prayer and half as a taunt.

"Come on, let's dance."

He pulled the trigger softly. A fireball the size of a basketball appeared before his eyes, and immediately after, an impact like a forceful kick to the shoulder struck Leon. Along with a gunshot like a clap of thunder, the bullet spat from the barrel and hurtled toward the runaway Boomer at three times the speed of sound.

He saw the upper body recoil in intense pain. Its left rear wheel gouged out, the Boomer tilted its body to the left. There was no doubt he had dealt considerable damage.

"Ha-ha! How do you like that, you monster!"

Though gasping in agony, the Boomer continued its flight. Leon followed after it without hesitation.

The moment she played her first song, a slow, dramatic anthem from a movie featuring variable-wing fighters, performed in an original arrangement, the atmosphere of the venue reached a flashpoint. From then on, it was an all-out assault. The first live performance by Priss Asagiri passed in what felt like an instant. She forgot the passage of time as she played her guitar and continued to sing. The strap of the Gibson Dark Fire dug into her shoulder, but she felt neither pain nor fatigue. The heat of the audience gave her strength.

So this is what they call the unity of a live show... it's an exhilaration I could never taste playing alone.

Priss felt something hot welling up from deep within her chest. Before it could stimulate her tear ducts, she opened her mouth.

"Thank you, everyone!!"

The headset microphone picked up her voice and spread it through the speakers. The audience gradually fell silent to hear her words. She stole a glance toward the wings of the stage. The owner of the live house, who had rented it to her at a bargain price, was holding up a cue card with a wry smile. On the card, it was written: *Only one more song! Give it your all!*

Priss gave a small nod and turned her face back to the audience.

"I want to sing more, but..."

She let her eyes wander and caught a group in sailor uniforms standing in the corner of the venue.

"I have a curfew, too."

The audience erupted in laughter at the words of the artist who transformed into a high school sophomore the moment she put on a uniform.

"Just one last song."

Priss readjusted her guitar and moved her feet to find her balance. Simultaneously, she casually turned a dial switch on the guitar's body. An electrical signal signaling a tuning correction traveled through the metal strings, prompting the motors built into the headstock to activate. The system, made by the German company Tronical, automatically adjusted the six strings to the optimal tension for the song she was about to sing in less than a second.

As soon as she confirmed the tuning with a light flick of her pick, she turned a bashful smile toward the audience.

"Please listen to a new song I just wrote, one that no one has heard yet!"

The air in the venue reached a boiling point and exploded.

The four-wheeled motorcycle operated by the armed detective, stationed between bravery and recklessness, and the runaway Boomer he was pursuing raced through the Yokohama Bay Bridge. The road led toward the Great Loop, a famous feature of the Metropolitan Expressway. Intense centrifugal force pulled Leon's body toward the outside of the loop.

"Guh!"

He groaned despite himself. The scream of the tires, the creaking of the suspension, and the warping of the frame followed. The lifespans of both Leon and the motorcycle were certainly being shortened. However, the reckless effort paid off. The distance between the half-man, half-vehicle monster and the four-wheeled motorcycle was steadily closing.

The Boomer twisted its upper body significantly and turned its face. It was a mechanical face molded with an aesthetic other than human. That non-human being glared at Leon with hatred and fear.

"Surrealism is outdated. Go get yourself displayed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art!"

Leon cursed as he twisted the throttle to the limit. The in-wheel motors emitted a scorched smell. Gaining further acceleration, Leon released the strength in both hands. He also relaxed

his legs, which had been gripping the body tightly until then, and his body was stripped away from the vehicle by the combined force of wind pressure and G-force.

Having lost a mass of nearly 100 kilograms including the armored suit, the four-wheeled motorcycle accelerated even further and charged toward the Boomer. Leon clearly saw the grotesque runaway machine freeze its upper body in surprise.

The motorcycle crashed like a wedge between the Boomer's chassis and the road surface, its wheels and frame crumpling. It spun while scattering violent sparks and slid toward the outer wall. It slammed into the wall. However, the kinetic energy was not lost even as it shattered the wall. The runaway Boomer and the motorcycle leaped into the air, entangled with one another.

He caught the sound of a woman's silk-tearing scream emitted by the monster, but it gradually faded into the distance. Rolling his body, he sprawled out on the road while steadying himself. He moved the tips of his limbs to check for any abnormalities in his body. He chose to ignore the pain radiating from various places. It was proof he was alive.

"I did it... serves you right."

Under his ragged breath, Leon spat out the words.

He felt like staying down right there. But when a new sound of destruction struck the surrounding air and spurred his heart, the armed detective forgot his pain and ran to the hole in the outer wall. His face stiffened at the sight he beheld.

During the instrumental break, Priss felt a certain response from the audience.

...It's working!

She wore a satisfied smile. She had felt internal anxiety over the leisurely opening of the song's melody. Toward the climax near the end of the song, Priss took a breath while playing an arpeggio. She opened her mouth.

The disaster fell immediately after.

A roar, as if lightning had struck right next to her, shook the venue, and the lights hanging from the ceiling beams fell all at once. The power for the lighting and amplifiers also cut out, and the sound of that destruction and the screams of the audience made the air in the darkened hall tremble.

Immediately, the emergency lights flickered on. Having gained enough light to maintain her vision, Priss looked up at the ceiling, her eyes and mouth wide open. Something like a car had crashed through the ceiling and was caught on the beams. The ceiling had been made of

lightweight materials so that if it fell, it wouldn't harm the audience below; instead, the beams had been reinforced to withstand even a truck falling on them.

She remembered being told by the owner that because of the location beneath the expressway, they had prepared for the possibility of such an accident. "Forewarned is forearmed." She had just seen the proof of that, but Priss was stunned by the sheer shock.

"Everyone, run!"

Priss's natural voice, not going through the headset microphone, echoed to every corner of the venue. An emergency buzzer sounded at the exits, and revolving lights flashed. Along with a motor sound, the large doors, used only for moving in large stage sets, began to open. The owner, who was at the side of the stage, must have pressed the emergency button.

"Priss, you get out of here too!"

She heard the owner's voice from the side.

"I know!"

She unplugged the cable from her guitar and turned her body to head toward the emergency exit behind the stage. At that moment, a voice that was neither a scream nor a shout, a sound that grated on the nerves, echoed from above.

She looked up.

"Is a person... growing out of it?"

Priss almost lost her footing for real this time. Hanging from the hood of the machine, which could barely be identified as a car, was the upper body of a monster with nearly ten hands growing from it. It was not human.

"A Boomer!"

However, it no longer looked like a "robot that closely mimics a human." It was a mechanical monster. That was the more appropriate name. The monster hung its upper body from the vehicle resting upside down on the beams and stretched its arms toward the ground several meters below.

"What the hell is that thing!"

Priss, looking up in amazement, noticed a new strange noise. It was coming from the monster fused from a car and a humanoid robot. The metallic-skinned monster rocked its upper body back and forth, attempting to pull itself out of the vehicle chassis.

Eventually, the upper body slipped out. More accurately, the torso stretched and dripped downward. It was like watching highly viscous oil drip.

It reminded Priss of an old movie she had watched with her foster father, a liquid metal assassin robot from the future. Its movements were similar. When the monster Boomer's hands reached the floor, the long torso that had been connected to the vehicle snapped off.

"Even DreamWorks would be surprised by this..."

While calming her confused mind with long, deep breaths, the seventeen-year-old rocker desperately kept up her bravado. Inside her chest, anger slowly began to burn.

The grotesque Boomer let its long torso wriggle on the floor like a snake, slowly surveying its surroundings. Then, its mechanical twin eyes caught the human standing on the stage. The moment their gazes met, the Boomer, which had a skeletal structure like a woman's, opened its mouth wide and let out a creaking, threatening cry.

Priss Asagiri took that as the opening bell for a fight.

"Don't screw with me!"

Priss grabbed her headset and hurled it at the Boomer. One of the Boomer's arms snapped like a whip, batting it away. In that interval, Priss had already kicked off the edge of the stage.

"Take this!"

Grabbing the neck of her Gibson Darkfire with both hands, Priss raised it high over her head and brought it crashing down upon the Boomer's head. The sturdy plywood body of the guitar shattered the Boomer's cranium, sinking deep into the metal. Nearly ten arms clawed at the air before falling into a collective spasm. It was proof that her attack was working.

"It's working, it's working! You piece of crap Boomer!"

Priss swung the guitar up once more and, with every ounce of her strength, slammed the body into the Boomer's cracked head.

"You... ruined... my first... live show!"

After striking it repeatedly, she stepped back a few paces. The head of the monstrous Boomer no longer retained its original shape. Everything from the nose up was completely pulverized, with fine wires writhing feebly in the ruin. Only a weak moan emanated from its half-open mouth.

"Drop dead!"



Holding the 4.2kg Gibson like a baseball bat, Priss swung it through in one swift motion aimed at the Boomer's neck. A short scream escaped the Boomer's mouth as its head and torso were

forced into a tearful separation. With a heavy thud, the head fell to the ground. The torso convulsed for a while, but eventually ceased its movement, collapsing as if to cover the fallen head.

"Serves you right."

This is for Mom and Dad.

Fourteen years ago, a young girl had lost her parents to a runaway Boomer; now, she directed a gaze full of hatred at the scrap metal before her. Then, still in a state of daze, she threw away the wreckage of the guitar, which could no longer be called an instrument, and whispered.

"I dedicate this victory to Jimi Hendrix..."

In the hushed venue, Priss's ears, which were gradually regaining their composure, caught a small sound. It was someone sobbing.

"..... I'm scared. Help me, big brother."

At that voice, she hurriedly looked around. The sobbing came from the shadow of a thick, sturdy pillar in the middle of the hall, where the emergency lights couldn't reach. Running over, she found a girl with braided hair crouching behind the pillar and crying.

As Priss knelt before her and gently touched her shoulders, the girl's body jumped in fright. A school junior, identifiable by her sailor uniform, raised a face messy with tears.

"Are you okay? What's your name?"

"..... Yeah. Nene. My name is Nene Rokuhara."

She nodded her head up and down in small increments while hiccuping.

"Nene, why didn't you run with everyone else?"

"I was so surprised my legs gave out... and then everyone left with the other people... and Nene was left all alone."

Priss smiled and stood up, assured that the girl was now safe.

"Can you stand?"

"My legs still don't have any strength in them..."

Priss gave a wry smile at her junior's weak reply. Looking closely, the girl had scraped her knees, and something red was seeping through. Feeling Nene trembling, Priss hugged her.

Looking into her eyes, she spoke in a voice so gentle she seemed like a different person compared to her performance.

"It's okay. It'll definitely be okay."

The siren of a police car could be heard from afar. Someone who had escaped during the earlier chaos must have reported it. However, it wouldn't arrive immediately. The roads were complex due to redevelopment, and the area was in chaos with fleeing customers. It would still take a while for the police to arrive.

"Hey, can't you go any faster!?" Leon shouted violently.

The police officer, who had the misfortune of passing by while on patrol, replied while half-crying.

"We're doing 130 kilometers! Any more than this in the city is dangerous!"

"Dammit!"

Leon clicked his tongue. He knew there was a live music house exactly where the runaway Boomer had fallen. He had heard about it just that morning. His sister had proudly told him about it; that tonight she was going to her senior's live show held at the "Bayside Hall" under the Metropolitan Expressway Great Loop in Tokyo Bay.

Leon checked the watch on his left wrist. Because they had argued fiercely over her curfew, he remembered the time clearly. The show started at 18:30 and ended at 19:30. Even with an encore, everyone was supposed to be out by 20:00. The current time was 19:38. She must have been right in the middle of the encore.

He took out his smart communicator. Sliding his finger across the screen, he launched an application that tracked family location information. He checked it over and over, but the result was always the same. His sister, Nene Rokuhara, was still at Bayside Hall.

Cursing his own carelessness, Leon prayed.

Nene, stay safe and wait for me!

"You should be able to stand soon, right, Nene?"

"Um... I was thinking, maybe, you could lend me a shoulder..."

"Don't be such a spoiled brat. Fine, I guess I have no choice."

Priss put her arm around Nene's shoulder and hoisted her up. Nene managed to stand, albeit wobbly. As she brushed off the hem of her skirt, she spoke.

"Asagiri-senpai, what about that monster?"

"Ah, I crushed its head."

Just as she said that, Priss turned her head toward the front of the stage and gasped. The grotesque Boomer that was supposed to be there was gone. Only the oil staining the floor testified that it had been lying there until just a moment ago.

"We're getting out of here quietly."

As she took a step forward, something draped itself over the two of them from above.

"KYAAAAAA!!!"

It was the Boomer, transformed beyond the point of being called humanoid. The head that Priss had smashed was now embedded in the center of its chest. It distorted its reconstructed face and glared at Priss, letting out a threatening cry. Nene's ear-splitting scream echoed right next to her, the volume making Priss's head spin.

"Run!"

The moment she turned and started running while holding Nene, Priss felt a heavy, dull impact in her abdomen.

"Guh!"

The Boomer had struck her with its torso, which had stretched long like a giant serpent. The Boomer's arms grabbed the two of them as they stumbled backward.

"Dammit!"

Before she could resist, Priss and her junior were ensnared by nearly ten arms.

"No, let go! Help me, big brother!!" Nene wailed right beside her.

"Darn it!!"

This is no joke! I can't let there be injuries, or worse, deaths, at my first live show!

She struggled desperately to let at least the girl escape. However, the Boomer's arms wrapped around her body tightened with increasing force.

"It hurts, it hurts! Let go!!"

Whether Nene was being squeezed just as hard, her face distorted in agony and screams poured from her mouth.

This is bad. At this rate, I won't be able to breathe.

"Ugh, guh!"

Her ribs and the bones in both arms began to scream. Intense pain battered her mind, and she began to feel faint.

"Let go! I said let go!!"

Beside her, Nene was still making a fuss.

"Geez, take this!"

Nene bit down on a long, slender lump that branched off from the arms wrapped around her body and wavered before her eyes like a tentacle. The next moment, her face distorted, and she released the metal lump from her mouth.

"Waaaaah, I chipped a tooth! I cut the inside of my mouth!"

What a... uselessly energetic... brat!

Amidst her fading consciousness, Priss felt an out-of-place admiration for her junior's unexpected toughness.

Don't screw with me. Don't screw with me, damn it! To have both parents and child killed by Boomers... it's a joke that's not even funny.

Priss cursed her fate and brandished a fragment of her soul to make a final resistance, attempting to spit out one last bit of bravado.

"It huuuuurts!!"

At that moment, the Boomer's body shuddered. The vibration traveled through Priss's spinal cord as intense pain, whipping her spirit.

"Agah!"

The force squeezing her body loosened slightly. Not missing the opening, she sucked air into her lungs.

"You brat!"

She moved the part of her legs from the knees down that was still free, preparing to strike with her heel.

《Don't move!》

At that moment, a dignified voice was heard from above.

"What the hell is that!!"

It was a woman's voice, though it had been processed with a vocoder to sound like a synthesizer.

Is even the 'voice from heaven' going techno these days?

She looked up while cursing internally. Something descended from the ceiling beams. The shadow had a slender, feminine silhouette. It held something long and thin in its right hand.

A flash of light reflected the red emergency glow. Suddenly, the metal bonds that had been tormenting her were all severed. Along with the Boomer's severed arms, Priss fell to the floor. Right beside her, Nene, who had landed on her backside, let out a scream.

《Quickly, escape!》

Once again, the electronically processed woman's voice echoed. Without wasting time to identify the source of the voice, Priss grabbed Nene and crawled away from the spot. When they reached near the exit they had entered from, a shocking sound like a whip striking the air hit their backs. Unthinkingly, she stopped and looked behind her.

"Who are they...?" Priss muttered, staring at the person confronting the grotesque Boomer.

There stood a person clad in sleek, fluid armor the likes of which she had never seen, holding a slender longsword in their right hand. It was neither a robot nor a Boomer. The head was large, like a motorcycle helmet, indicating a human head was housed inside. Then there was that haughty, commanding tone from before. A Boomer with an "attitude" was simply impossible.

Once again, a shocking sound shook the air. In the next instant, something like a spear pierced the Boomer's thick, long torso. Priss was startled when she looked toward the direction the projectile had come from. Honestly, how many more surprises was she expected to handle?

Standing atop a thick beam, the kind meant to protect the venue from debris falling from the highway, was another person wearing armor similar to the one confronting the Boomer. This one held a large bow in their right hand instead of a sword.

Was that... an arrow that just hit it?!?!

As if to prove her theory correct, the warrior on the beam notched a new arrow and drew the bow back to its limit. The moment the arrow was released, another shockwave shook the venue.

"It broke the sound barrier!!"

Realizing the true nature of the explosive impact sounds, Priss shouted out despite herself. With the speed of instantaneous movement, the arrow pierced the Boomer's torso. The Boomer was pinned to the floor like an insect being turned into a specimen. With every strike, the Boomer screamed and arched its upper body. It was clear that the creature was weakening.

《Judgment!》

The armored warrior with the rapier spoke as she leveled her sword. Then, with speed the eye could not follow, she swung the blade in a continuous blur. After her movements ceased, the grotesque Boomer, the thing that had pushed Priss and Nene to the brink of death, had been reduced to tiny pieces.

"Incredible..."

When the words escaped her lips, the armored warrior with the rapier turned her face toward them.

《Are you still here? Or did your legs simply give out halfway through?》

"What... did you say?"

Hearing words that lacked even a shred of sympathy, something snapped inside Priss .

"Asagiri-senpai..."

"Ah..."

Just as a shout of anger reached her throat, the junior clinging to her right arm spoke up.

"For now, let's just say thank you, okay?"

Hearing such simple, sound logic caused Priss to lose her edge.

《I don't need your thanks. We only saved you because it's our rule,》 the armored warrior carrying the longsword rapier said dismissively.

Beside her, the other warrior who had been firing arrows from the beam landed. Despite the armor appearing quite hard, the landing was as light as an angel descending.

《Don't tell anyone what you saw here tonight. Forget it. It's for your own sake.》

While the rapier warrior spoke to Priss and the other, the archer knelt before the shredded remains of the Boomer and picked something up. After confirming what it was, the rapier warrior turned back to them once more.

《Understood? Forget it.》

With that declaration, the two armored warriors bent their knees slightly and made a massive leap. It was a jump that made one wonder where such driving force came from within those slender suits. In a flash, they landed on the ceiling beam, leapt again, and flew out through the hole in the ceiling the Boomer had made.

"What the hell was that!" Priss spat out after blankly watching them leave.

"Those people were so cool, Senpai!"

"You...!"

The high school sophomore whose debut live show had been ruined had no words for her junior's honest impression. The sound of police sirens could be heard from the distance.

"Nene! Are you okay? Are you alive!?" a man's voice shouted from the entrance of Bayside Hall.

"Big brother! Nene is alive!"

Nene reacted instantly and ran toward the voice. Priss gave a wry smile at how energetic she seemed. She casually checked her wristwatch. She was shocked to see that not even five minutes had passed since that monster fell from the ceiling.

It felt like she had experienced a lifetime's worth of surprises in a single night.

"This is no joke..."

Priss Asagiri took a deep breath and looked up at the ceiling. She shook her head lightly as if to shake off a nightmare. Through the hole in the ceiling, a large, red moon peeked through.

Chapter 2: Get World Queen

Even if the final day of humanity were to arrive, morning would always come.

The morning after her debut live show was trashed, Priss Asagiri was pedaling along Waseda Street as usual.

"Ngh!"

The unevenness of the road, which the suspension couldn't fully absorb, jarred her bike. The impact caused the joints in her aching body to scream. Grimacing, she bit her lip and looked ahead. She could see the traffic light where Waseda Street and Nakasugi Street intersected. Usually, it was a trivial distance, but today it felt terribly far.

Maybe I should have just taken a taxi after all...

A sense of regret bubbled up from her flagging spirit. After the Boomer intrusion incident, Priss and her junior had been taken into police protection. Despite being covered in scratches, Priss had barked, "I can walk!" The paramedics ignored her words, forced them onto stretchers, and shoved them straight into an ambulance.

At the hospital, they faced emergency treatment, precise examinations, and a detective waiting with eager anticipation. She was covered in bandages, her body "sliced" into digital sections by magnetism and ultrasound, and finally capped off with a mysterious psychological test.

The diagnosis given was "minor bruising, muscle fatigue, scratches, and a degree of stress." Even a slightly senile bone-setter could have figured that out. It was a waste of insurance money. The detective, for his part, was pointlessly persistent and preachy. It was natural to be asked for her name and address, but after that, he only asked what *he* wanted to know and didn't listen to her story at all.

She couldn't understand at all what the question "Why did a high schooler schedule a live performance that would interfere with weekday classes?" had to do with the incident. Faced with pointless questions that lacked any clear aim, Priss's patience finally snapped. She remembered rebuking the police for their late arrival. She also remembered the detective getting furious. From there she might have gone a bit wild. She remembered being extremely agitated.

She believed she had returned to her home in Koenji with her foster father, who had come to pick her up by car. She must have taken a light shower and fallen into a sleep as deep as an

ascension. When she woke up in the morning, her hair smelled of shampoo and she had properly changed her clothes. In any case, she had no memory of what happened between getting agitated at the hospital and waking up.

"I'm heading out!"

Yesterday was chaotic, but a new day had begun. Ten minutes ago, as soon as she said her goodbye, she opened the front door and straddled her beloved bike. Turning through two intersections, she took the back roads through the residential area and emerged onto Waseda Street. She sprinted toward the Nakasugi intersection under the May sun. It wasn't a long distance, but she was already drenched in sweat.

However, a sudden, "blessed" revelation arrived, far too late, telling her she was allowed to rest. Apparently, her homeroom teacher, surprised by the news of last night's incident, had contacted her home.

"You're lucky; it's a teacher-approved ditch day. You want to come back?"

Her foster father smiled at her through the smart communicator. However, she declined with a "Thanks," and immediately cut the transmission. She licked her lips and thought it was a "lucky kind of unlucky."

Being allowed to rest was lucky, but not being able to stop was unlucky. Thinking about how things never went quite as planned, she lifted herself off the seat to accelerate her Alex Moulton bike.

"I'm gonna do it! Rock You!!"

The rock artist in the sailor uniform shouted vigorously to psych herself up and pedaled with all her might.

She arrived at school much earlier than she expected. She had an excuse ready about being late because of the incident, but she felt it would be unsportsmanlike to use that card. However, the price was high, and her physical exhaustion was more intense than usual. By the time she reached the classroom, her legs felt like lead.

"Morning!"

Priss slapped her cheeks with both palms to gear herself up and opened the door with more force than usual. Suddenly, cheers erupted from around her. It was as if she had entered a stadium welcoming a marathon runner wobbling toward the finish line. "Huh?" "Eh?" Voices rose from all around. It seemed they were worried about her.

"Priss, good morning!" "Is your body really okay?" "You should have just taken the day off!"

Priss wondered for a moment what was happening before an idea occurred to her, and she gave a weak smile. She realized anew the terrifying speed at which mass media and word-of-mouth transmitted information. Being pitied felt uncool, so she decided to put up a front.

"It was nothing, really. It wasn't a big deal at all, ha-ha-ha!"

"As expected of a tough girl, 'Priss the Boomer Killer'!"

Priss, who had been heading toward her seat, blinked and came to a halt as she looked at the source of the voice.

"What are you even talking about?"

Her classmates turned puzzled faces toward her. There was a strange sense of dissonance; clearly, they were not on the same page.

"I did what?" "You're the one who trashed that Boomer, right, Priss?"

"Haaah?" Priss let out a voice that sounded like the air was escaping her head. A cold sweat, different from before, trickled down her back.

What on earth is going on here?

Priss wore a cramped smile. Then, while feeling flustered, she spoke the "official announcement" that had been drummed into her beforehand.

"There's no way! That thing just broke down on its own. You heard them say so on the news, didn't you?"

It had been a massive high-speed chase that shook the Shuto Expressway Wangan Line and the entire Bay Area. The incident began when a truck loaded with illegally modified Boomers broke through a checkpoint. The High-Speed Mobile Unit and the Special Anti-Boomer Team engaged in a fierce gunbattle with the smugglers. During the escape, the truck failed to make a turn on a large elevated loop and slammed into a wall, falling beneath the overpass. Unluckily, it fell right onto the live house where Priss was performing, and the driver was killed. The heavily damaged, illegally modified Boomers went berserk and attacked the high school girls who were late to evacuate, but they soon began to self-destruct and ceased functioning entirely. Then the police and paramedics arrived, and miraculously, there were no casualties. The news reported this as the official statement.

The fact that it was an SUV rather than a truck, that the Boomer had integrated with the vehicle, and, of course, the fact that it kept moving even after its head was blown off, was not reported at all. As for those women, the armored warriors, Priss shook her head inwardly.

Regardless, the police had strictly forbidden her from speaking. As far as she was concerned, she had no choice but to repeat the official announcement as the sole truth.

She shrugged her shoulders while wearing a bitter smile.

"So, just like the news said, that thing just broke on its own."

"Oh, come on, you're lying again." Her classmate laughed and pointed toward the back of the classroom. "I already heard the whole story from a girl who 'saw' it."

"Wh...!"

Priss was left speechless by those words. Someone who was not a classmate was sitting in a seat in the center of the room. Classmates were swarming around her. Because of the noisy crowd, she couldn't see who was at the center. In her daze, she heard a female classmate ask a question.

"Hey, did she really hit it with that expensive-looking guitar?"

"That's right! Did you know guitars were percussion instruments, senpai?"

A carefree, cheerful voice echoed through the classroom. The face of a junior with twin-tails immediately surfaced in Priss's mind. With a voice that seemed to vibrate from the bottom of her stomach, she called out that name.

"Nene Rokuhara...!"

The person named turned around. Upon seeing Priss's face, she wore an innocent smile.

"Good morning, Priss-chan!"

The unexpected, lighthearted smile and the way she addressed her blew away Priss's anger.

"Chan...?"

Priss had been mature since she was a child; she had never been called "-chan" before. To be addressed so familiarly by a junior using casual speech was a first for her. Priss's emotions and words began to spin their wheels.

"Are you okay? Nene was fine, but you fought that Boomer really hard, Priss-chan. Does anything hurt?"

Rising from her chair, she walked over with a bright smile.

[...]

Priss stood with her mouth half-open, wondering what on earth was happening, but she couldn't comprehend it. She just stood there in a daze, her eyes focused on something far away.

Nene, standing before Priss, tilted her head and peered at her. Then she reached out and gently stroked Priss's side hair.

"As I thought, are you hurting somewhere? You shouldn't push yourself~"

Hearing that sugary voice, Priss finally rebooted her thoughts. She lightly brushed Nene's hand away and spoke in an interrogative tone.

"You! Why are you calling me '-chan'!?"

No, no, that's not the problem! Priss criticized herself inside her head, but she couldn't find the words to follow up.

"But Priss-chan is Priss-chan, right?" Nene replied with a cloudless smile, tilting her head.

"Nene and Priss-chan are comrades who shared a life-or-death situation, right? We've moved past the wall between senior and junior."

Priss stared at Nene at the unexpected words. Nene was casting a heavy, upward glance at Priss. Snapping out of the strange atmosphere where they were exchanging serious stares, Priss realized the boys around them were watching with great interest, their eyes gleaming with a suspicious light.

"Wh... don't say it in such a misleading way!"

Priss felt the skin behind her ears grow hot.

Damn it, you filthy beasts!

Priss raised her voice at the boys, whose heads were filled with delusions.

"It's not like that! It's completely different! You perverts!"

Priss looked around and barked fiercely. The audience surrounding the two flinched for a moment under her sharp gaze. Seizing that opening, Priss grabbed Nene's shoulder and dragged her from the classroom into the hallway.

"Come with me for a second!"

"Ow, Priss-chan, that hurts! Hug me more gently!"

Ignoring the protests, Priss forcibly took Nene to the stairs leading to the rooftop, almost carrying her. In the classroom they had vanished from, the girls let out yellow cheers, their lewd delusions exploding.

There was no one on the rooftop, which was surrounded by high fences to prevent falls. Priss took a deep breath and shouted with all her might.

"What do you think you're doing!?"

Nene received it with a puzzled face. "What do you mean, Priss-chan?"

Priss decided to press her for specifics. "The story about me defeating the Boomer is a total lie, isn't it!?"

"But it's true that you hit it, and those people in the armor told us to keep quiet... Don't be mad, Priss-chan..." Nene looked at Priss with a troubled expression, knitting her brows.

Well, it's true I hit it once. After thinking that, Priss realized something and questioned Nene further.

"You... did you happen to not tell the police about that either?"

"Yep!"

Hearing the energetic response, Priss's anger evaporated.

"They'd never believe that a justice hero appeared like in a drama. Did you talk, Priss-chan?"

"Ah..." Priss replied with a dull look. She had told the detective at the hospital everything, from start to finish. She had completely forgotten the final words spoken by the haughty armored warrior.

<It's fine, forget it.>

Priss suddenly remembered the electronically processed voice.

"That's no good. Priss-chan broke the promise. Even though they saved us."

Priss looked up at the sky with a stern face. Peering at Priss's profile, Nene offered her words of comfort.

"It's okay. I'm sure nobody will believe the story about the people in armor anyway."

"Right, I just remembered. What is the deal with your brother!?" Priss suddenly shouted.

Nene responded blankly. "What do you mean? He's a detective. I told you yesterday, didn't I?"

"Ugh, that guy was a terrible detective! Your brother!"

Leon Rokuhara, who had questioned Priss, had scoffed at the story of "armored suits like nothing he'd ever seen." In the end, he had spoken as if he truly looked down on her, suggesting that because she was so shocked by her concert being ruined, she was longing for a savior and confusing her memories with special effects heroes she saw on TV as a child.

After Detective Leon had disappeared, Priss said the same thing to another detective, but he looked at her as if she were a pitiful person. Then, he kindly told her, "We will conduct further questioning once your feelings have settled. So please go home for today." To top it off, he even gave Priss the contact information for a crime victim psychologist, claiming it was for PTSD prevention.

"Seriously, it's an unbelievable story, but you saw it too, right? You're a witness just like me!"

"How about we try to keep our secret promise together? Hehe, Priss-chan."

"Don't call me 'Priss-chan' so nonchalantly!"

Priss caught Nene in a full nelson and ground her fists into Nene's temples. Nene's pained cries echoed vainly across the rooftop.

The Metropolitan Police Department building towered as if guarding the southern side of the Imperial Palace. In a special room in one corner, a small storm was about to brew.

"Rokuhara-kun. I really dislike violent incidents."

A man with graying hair spoke while looking up at Leon. Holding a teacup of bancha tea dearly with both hands, he somehow reminded one of a rural town hall employee. He did not look at all like a police officer who would be granted a private room despite being a section chief.

Leon Rokuhara looked at the ceiling and answered while standing at attention.

"Yes, I understand, Chief!"

Hearing that, Superintendent Ninomiya, the Chief of the AD-POLICE Investigation Division, pursed his lips.

"You don't understand. And what is that patch on your neck?"

Leon placed his hand on his neck at the chief's pointing. He grimaced at the scent of menthol.

That little brat... next time I see her...

"I have a message from Senior Superintendent Honda of the Traffic Mobile Unit. He said, 'As expected of the celebrity of the AD-POLICE, your courage and physical strength are impressive.'"

"Those words are too much for a junior like me."

"It was obviously sarcasm! Where in the world is there a detective who hijacks a police motorcycle from the Traffic Mobile Unit?"

"It was an urgent and emergency situation."

In fact, it was. If they had left the runaway Boomer as it was, Tokyo would have become a battlefield. Even the Chief wouldn't be able to sip bancha so leisurely right now.

Ninomiya slowly placed the teacup on the desk.

"The point is, Rokuhara-kun." He lowered his tone slightly, putting a bit of dignity into his words. "The reason you do things on your own is that you are conducting investigations by yourself. Because you have no one to consult, you get confused and act recklessly. It will be fine if you have an assistant. That is what I thought, but am I wrong?"

"With all due respect, Chief. Is there any capable detective in this division who can assist me?"

"There isn't," Chief Ninomiya said as if spitting it out. To his frustration, what his subordinate said was unfortunately correct.

The detectives here were required to have a broad range of advanced technical knowledge that would make even investigators from the Scientific Investigation Research Institute gasp. A detective of the same generation as Leon would be driven into a state of mental paralysis, eyes rolling. Furthermore, they were required to have physical strength and mobility that would amaze even the veterans of the Special Assault Team (SAT).

On top of that, Leon possessed more than enough of the "criminal scent" necessary for a detective. There was no way to prepare a unique partner for a unique existence. Therefore, Koichiro Ninomiya had no choice but to tacitly approve of Leon Rokuhara's solo investigations.

But that ends today.

Ninomiya wore a thin smile, thanking the progress of science and the tolerance of taxpayers.

"Until yesterday, that was the case."

Seeing the chief's knowing smile, Leon had a bad premonition, and something cold traced down his spine. With a triumphant feeling, Chief Ninomiya pressed the extension button on the desk phone.

"Come in."

Within seconds, there was a knock on the door connected to the hallway. A young plainclothes officer entered. He was about the same age and height as Leon. However, his build was slender. He had an atmosphere that suggested he would be more suited to being a host or an actor than a detective. He possessed a beauty that was almost un-Japanese.

Is this fragile guy my partner? Is he a second-generation immigrant from Europe? Leon speculated.

"This is Silva-kun. Rank is Sergeant."

"Oh, I see," Leon replied half-heartedly. The new detective, Silva, turned toward Leon and wore a smile. Leon thought it was a sweet smile that would make a young woman or a lady of leisure ascend to heaven on the spot.

"Nice to meet you, Inspector Rokuhara. I am honored to be your partner."

As Leon reflexively tried to shake Silva's outstretched right hand, he caught a small light flickering deep in Silva's eyes. Instantly, he pulled his hand back, his face hardening.

"Are you a Boomer?"

"Yes, that is correct. You noticed the slight brightness adjustment of the internal optical device."

Ignoring the words spoken flatly by the handsome humanoid machine, Leon turned toward the chief.

"Chief, explain this farce!"

"Silva is a research-support Boomer that our Metropolitan Police Department has introduced on a trial basis. Since it's been decided to conduct a test run here, I'm putting you in charge of him."

"Wait a minute!"

"The only people who know he is a Boomer are the top brass of the MPD, the executives of AD-POLICE, and you. Don't tell anyone. If the media finds out, they'll make a fuss about 'Boomers stealing jobs from intellectual workers.'"

"Of all people, why me..."

"Among our detectives, you are the most familiar with the cutting-edge technology implemented in Boomers. And you don't have a partner right now. Isn't it a perfect match?"

"You know very well how much I hate Boomers, Chief. Including the reason why!"

Ninomiya raised his right eyebrow. He put his right hand under the desk. A faint clicking sound echoed. Seeing that, a ferocious smile appeared on Ninomiya's cheeks.

"Hey, shut your mouth. Don't get cocky, you greenhorn."

Ninomiya's voice suddenly became coarse. He kicked his chair back, stood up, and glared at Leon with sanpaku eyes.

"I decided this by my authority. Do you have a complaint, huh!?"

The timid, salaryman-like atmosphere of Ninomiya was gone. Standing there was the "demon detective" who once terrified the yakuza of Tokyo and made the leader of the Kanto region's largest crime syndicate cry and apologize.

"But, making a tin-head like this my partner is too much..."

"Don't talk back! Don't get fussy over mere likes and dislikes!"

Chief Ninomiya stood before Leon and pulled an automatic pistol from his chest.

"W-wait, Chief."

"The candidate for Leon's partner..." The machine nodded and spoke in a calm voice. "I have confirmed that Superintendent Ninomiya's right shoulder, index finger, and eyeballs are moving in synchronization. In this case, I can predict with a 99 percent probability that he will point a gun. The probability of being able to block it is 96 percent."

"Your survival rate just went up all at once. A partner is someone you can rely on, right? In your case, it just happens to be *that*."

Chief Ninomiya pressed the muzzle of the Glock under Leon's jaw with blinding speed. He bared his teeth with a menacing expression.

"Rokuhara. I don't care how much confidence you have in your skills. But you couldn't prevent me from sticking this against you. In other words, you'd be 100 percent dead right here."

"No, usually you wouldn't expect this!"

"It's just carelessness. Our business is dealing with unpredictable runaway Boomers. If you let your guard down, you'll be a corpse in 0.1 seconds. To keep from dying, you need a partner to watch your back."

Ninomiya tilted his chin toward Silva and asked.

"Sergeant Silva. Could you predict that I would pull the Glock?"

"I had already sent an emergency response training signal to the Mother computer at the main office. Therefore, whatever happens here is training. If you keep talking nonsense, an accident might occur during training, you know?"

"Okay, I get it! I'll do it, I'll do it! Just let me work with this guy already!"

Leon replied desperately. The Chief's short temper was beyond reasonable. Ninomiya returned to his usual mild face. He put the Glock back in its holster and said leisurely.

"Well then, Rokuhara-kun, I'm counting on you. I am glad my cute subordinate has a partner. If you think of him as a communicator with a walking function, it's nothing, right?"

Leon Rokuhara walked down the hallway with an indignant stride. Right behind him followed the humanoid machine born of advanced technology. The female police officers and staff who witnessed them passing by all gasped in unison.

What do you mean, partner! What do you mean, walking communicator!

Indeed, the latest Boomers were quite excellent in their intellectual level. Higher models were recognized as having a higher level of intelligence than the average human. Leon Rokuhara knew the technology used in the evolution of Boomers better than anyone else in AD-POLICE. Because before aspiring to be a police officer, Leon had researched the technology that gives intelligence to Boomers in graduate school.

"Damn it! I regret ever going to graduate school!"

"Inspector Rokuhara, what is wrong?"

The silver-haired detective, who was not human and had become Leon's partner just a few minutes ago, asked from behind.

"Your pulse, respiration, and blood pressure are showing that you are in a fairly excited state..."

"Are you my high-performance health meter or something!?" Leon stopped, turned around, and shouted as if spitting it out.

"Checking the health status of a partner is included in the mission, Inspector Rokuhara."

Faced with a partner who answered expressionlessly, Leon Rokuhara looked up at the ceiling.

"...Stop that 'Inspector Rokuhara' stuff. It makes my back itch. Just 'Leon' is fine."

"Understood, Leon-san."

Leon's anger was defused, and he wore a bitter smile. The Boomer's voice softened just a bit.

At the same time, at a certain location in Tokyo.

In a dim, inorganic room, a girl with an intellectual appearance was facing a large monitor. It was not a recently popular nano-emissive monitor, but an organic EL liquid crystal monitor that had been popular a generation ago. While inputting something into an information terminal, she occasionally shifted her gaze to the desk next to her. It was a gesture that suggested she didn't want to look, but had no choice.

On the desk was a small object glowing faintly red. Eventually, she stopped her hands. She shook her head and let out a small sigh. It was then that the LED lights turned on brightly.

"Linna. If you stay in a dim room all the time, even your personality will become dark."

The voice of a spirited-looking girl rang out. Realizing who it was, the occupant of the room responded.

"I apologize, Lady Sylia. But I just can't concentrate unless it's dark. How should I put it..."

"You feel like someone is peeking from behind? Honestly, I can't help it with you."

The girl called Sylia shrugged her shoulders in a playful tone. It was a gesture that didn't quite match her lady-like speech and gothic lolita appearance. But in the next moment, her expression changed. She asked Linna in a serious voice.

"What are the analysis results for the core unit?"

"Lady Sylia. They are very interesting results."

Sylia leaned forward. "How interesting?"

Linna responded without changing her expression.

"There is no need to explain 'α GEED,' the technology that forms the basis of Boomer technology..."

"α GEED.' An unknown external force that governs the evolution of life on Earth. It is the core of technology that transcends existing human knowledge and has not been completely demystified." Sylia recited the cliché lines as if confirming them. "And? What about it?"

"Can you guess what lies at the end of life's evolution?"

At Linna's question, Sylia scoffed. "It's unknown technology because we don't know. If an advanced form can be made, I'd certainly like to see it."

Linna's lips relaxed slightly. Sylia raised her eyebrows at the reaction.

"No way...?"

"Exactly, My Lady. I think it's best if you see it for yourself first."

Linna dimmed the lights back to the state before Sylia arrived. The blue light of a projected keyboard appeared in the air. She operated the keyboard and played a video on the large 3D monitor placed in the center of the room. A crystal structure appeared in a large shot.

"It is an alloy of aluminum, silicon, iron, copper, manganese, and magnesium."

"6000 series alloy. The kind often used for automobile outer panels," Sylia said, and Linne nodded. She operated the pointer and enlarged a portion. A thread-like thing was visible between the lattice structures of the metal molecules. Sylia's eyes widened.

"This is...!"

"Lady Sylia, as expected, you noticed." Linna's cheeks relaxed at Sylia's immediate understanding. She quickly returned her expression to normal. This was not a laughing matter.

"I confirmed it by passing a microcurrent. Almost certainly, these are nerve fibers."

"That's impossible!" Sylia shouted. As far as she knew, no such technical system existed. Sylia and her group possessed considerable technical capabilities, but it would likely be impossible even if they used all their strength.

However, Linna was calm. She spoke in a tone that quietly stated facts.

"It is reality. It is clearly fused with metal on a molecular level, and nerve fibers are spread throughout. In other words..."

"It's a new super-technology, isn't it?"

"Yes. If used well, it will bring great benefits to humanity." Linna continued in a calm voice. "Unfortunately, it can also be used for evil. If it has enough capacity to correspond to neural tissue, it can control any metallic object."

"This time it was an SUV. But even something larger, you mean?"

"Yes. Depending on the capacity of the artificial intelligence held by the Boomer individual, whether it's a truck, a linear train, or a warship, as long as it's metal, it is possible to fuse with it and hijack it."

"How could they..." Sylia groaned. she spoke the worst-case scenario. "Even the UN's latest mega-float aircraft carrier 'Enterprise' floating off the coast of Okinawa could be hijacked. Is that what you mean?"

"Yes. The latest carrier-based aircraft 'Sea Spectre' and the new nuclear submarine 'Jericho' class for underwater security, everything included."

At Linna's words, Sylia looked up at the ceiling. Seeing that, Linna added as if to reassure her.

"This is strictly a theoretical discussion. To actually hijack the Enterprise, an artificial brain of 100 square meters would be required. It's not realistic."

After saying that, Linna nodded deeply to reassure Sylia.

"It's okay, the principle has been identified. I will immediately begin creating counter-nanomachines."

"Is a response possible?" Sylia crossed her arms.

Linna smiled. "As you know, we have the power to make it possible."

"I'm counting on you. Our battle depends on it."

After saying that, Sylia tried to brighten the lights. Linna stopped her with her hand.

"Wait, My Lady. There is one more thing I'd like you to see."

The image on the 3D monitor changed. A small crystal structure, different from before, was projected. It was a beautiful crystal, like a snowflake.

"Nanomachines? What about them?"

"These were discovered inside the core unit. According to the internal analysis results, there are traces suggesting that these interfered and stopped its movement."

"Linna, that means..."

"It is likely as you imagine, My Lady."

Seeing Sylia's surprise at the report, Linna nodded with satisfaction.

"To think they would be found now..."

Linna responded to Sylia's murmur. "There are three candidates. One of them has already been taken care of."

"That was quick."

Linna replied with a bitter smile. "Well, half of it was a coincidence... What shall we do about the remaining two? Shall we secure them?"

In response to Linna's question, Sylia nodded deeply this time. She commanded in a tone filled with strong will.

"Of course. Linna, call Meiei immediately. Top priority."

"Understood, My Lady."

Linna gave a bow. She operated the aerial keyboard and switched off the 3D monitor. After confirming that, Sylia increased the lighting brightness. The LEDs emitted white light, brightly illuminating the room.

The true identity of the object that had been glowing suspiciously on the desk was revealed. It was the Boomer's core unit. It was considerably damaged, but that was natural. This was the core unit of the runaway Boomer that Leon had shot, Priss had decapitated, and Nene had bitten into yesterday.

Linna and Sylia, these two girls were the armored warriors. The two exchanged glances and gave a light bow. After that, they began to move without saying a single word, solely to fulfill their mission.

The bell announcing freedom rang out. Priss stood up immediately as the modern Japanese class, which was meaningless to her, ended. She was the first to open the door and jump out into the hallway. She had a reason to hurry.

As long as one is alive, it is natural law to become hungry. Seeking nutritional intake is necessary for maintaining life. Furthermore, it is even more so for someone in their growth spurt. Priss was moving on biological instinct.

Running down the stairs two at a time, there was only one phrase in her mind: *Egg fried rice!*

Today was Wednesday. It was the day when egg fried rice was half-price for high school students only at "Hongkon-tei" next to the school. The quantity was limited to only ten servings. It was high rarity. Priss loved the fried rice at Hongkon-tei.

Simple is best! Priss loved it. It was a simple composition consisting only of eggs and green onions, with a few pieces of chashu pork in the luxurious versions. The seasoning was only salt and pepper. It achieved a miracle where the cook's intention was poured into it. It stood alone as a main dish without needing other side dishes.

Once she turned the last corner, it was a straight line to "Hongkon-tei." Priss took a forward-leaning posture and put strength into her feet, her basketball shoes kicking the floor. This straight line would decide the match. She shouted with spirit.

"Heeerrreee I goooooooo...! Aah?"

The end of the shout Priss let out became a question. Suddenly, something jumped out from the side and clung to her. It clung to her waist and robbed Priss of her dash power. Priss, who opened her mouth to yell with all her might, lost her posture. Without even sending a glance, a carefree voice rang out near her.

"P-r-i-i-s-s-c-h-a-a-n!"

There was only one person in the world with such a carefree voice. Nene Rokuhara.

Priss took two or three weak steps and tried to drag Nene along. But no matter how carefree, a high school girl was quite heavy. Her rapid advance stopped there. She slumped her shoulders in defeat.

Beside the girl who had lost her momentum, other "heroes" aiming for "Hongkon-tei" were running past. Their number easily exceeded ten. Getting the half-price egg fried rice at "Hongkon-tei" was now hopeless.

Next Wednesday was a holiday. Therefore, to get the half-price egg fried rice, she would have to wait at least two weeks. Priss collapsed to her knees. The light faded from her eyes, and her mouth was left half-open. She was stunned by the weight of the lost opportunity.

Nene hugged the heartbroken Priss. She said in a voice of pure innocence:

"Priss-chan! Let's go eat together!"

Nene peered into Priss's face. She looked puzzled by the lack of response. She took a deep breath and almost shouted in Priss's ear.



"P-r-i-s-s-c-h-a-n! F-o-o-o-o-d!"

As if suddenly regaining consciousness, the light returned to Priss's eyes. She blinked a few times and looked around.

"Where is... my half-price egg fried rice...?"

"Could it be 'Hongkon-tei'? That's no good, Priss-chan. You'll never make it from here."

Nene shook her head. She held up her index finger and said proudly:

"You're too late, too late. If you don't go a bit earlier, you definitely won't make it. Be careful next time~"

Priss's eyes widened, and she achieved a complete reboot.

"N-e-n-e-e-e-e! YOU WERE THE O-O-O-N-E!"

She grabbed Nene's shoulders and shook her violently back and forth. Nene closed her eyes as if it felt good. Then she spoke in a pampered tone.

"I'm what?"

"Y-y-you, you, you..."

"So what? Priss-chan."

As Priss was about to say more, she noticed that the surroundings were somewhat noisy. She looked around once more. Girls were standing around Priss and Nene at a distance. Suddenly, one of the first-year girls whispered.

"Asagiri-senpai and Nene are they you know... like *that*..."

"Hey, do you think so? Do you really think so?" "Is this that 'suspension bridge effect'¹ thing? It must be, right?"

Tch! This was bad. She didn't want to think about what was what, but it was definitely bad. The fact that Priss and Nene had been attacked by a Boomer was already known to everyone in the school. After all, it wasn't just on the news this morning; Nene, a participant, had been telling everyone regardless of who they were. Anyway, she had to do something about this situation. With that single thought, Priss shouted.

"Nene, let's run!"

¹ Japanese concept that when two people undergo a shared near death trauma and it turns into romantic attraction.

Priss grabbed Nene and ran away from the spot. Priss decided not to hear the shrill cheers that exploded behind them.

"Food, food. Fun, fun food!"

Priss looked at Nene, who was leisurely singing a mysterious hum, with a sigh. The disasters befalling her were clearly caused by Nene. However, for some reason, she couldn't hate her. She didn't know the answer, whether it was because of Nene's carefree nature or because of her hunger. She didn't have the energy to think.

Priss decided to walk a bit further today. Most of the shops around the school were light meal types, other than "Hongkon-tei." After all, this was a residential area, a location where they couldn't expect a large number of customers other than high school students.

Still, there were shops with reliable tastes. The authentic coffee shop "Kohii Kazoku²" and the sweets shop "Shiroganeya" were famous enough to be in tourist guidebooks. But Priss had no choice but to skip the famous shops.

The pride of "Kohii Kazoku" was the pasta lunch. However, the menu was decided weekly. This week, it was only Pescatore with mussels. Since she got hives whenever she ate shellfish, it was something she absolutely couldn't eat.

The Makunouchi³ lunch at "Shiroganeya" was wonderful. Priss was always impressed by the kindness of using seasonal vegetables and fish and serving brown rice for health. That was, except for the point that the price was 1,500 yen.

Therefore, Priss was making her way toward the shopping district. In the shopping district, there were the beef croquettes of "Matsunaga Meat Shop," which she loved next to "Hongkon-tei." If she sandwiched them between slices of bread from "Bakery Shimizu," they transformed into the highest-quality sandwich. It was one of her favorite menus, though it lost out to half-price fried rice.

The weather was good. It wasn't bad to walk all the way to the shopping district, which was full of greenery and had sidewalks covered in grass. Nene, who was ahead, stopped skipping and turned around. She spoke happily.

"Taking a walk like this is also really fun!"

"Yeah. It would have been more fun if we were eating half-price fried rice at 'Hongkon-tei'."

"Priss-chan, I told you earlier. You have to leave a bit earlier or it's no good."

² Coffee Family

³ Makunouchi is a bento of mostly rice, fish, meat, pickles, eggs, vegetables, and umeboshi.

"That's why *you*... ah, forget it."

Priss shook her head at Nene's eyes, which were sparkling like a small animal's. Her pace was completely thrown off. She let out a sigh, not knowing how many times that made today.

"Why are you following me, Nene?"

"Why? Because you brought me here, Priss-chan! By carrying me forcibly~"

Nene looked up with an upward glance. It was the expression of a devil pretending to be innocent.

"Well, I couldn't exactly stay there in that situation, could I?"

"That's true. If we don't hurry, lunch will be over."

Priss lightly tapped Nene's head as if rubbing it with her palm. Nene said while rubbing her head.

"Ow. Priss-chan hit me~"

"I told you, stop with the 'Priss-chan'!"

Suddenly, Nene tilted her head.

"By the way, Priss-chan, where are we headed?" Nene asked, her voice filled with a relaxed lethargy.

Priss let out a weak breath and pointed. "Look, you can see it, right? 'Matsunaga Meat Shop.' Over there..."

"I get it! Beef croquettes!"

Priss smiled with satisfaction. This was the first moment in several hours that human-like communication had actually succeeded.

"Exactly. Some people say the menchi-katsu is better, but I prefer the beef croquettes. That faint taste of beef you get in the middle of all that softness..."

"Nene and big brother love them, too. They're delicious, aren't they!"

At Nene's simple agreement, which completely ignored Priss's attempt at a culinary lecture, Priss offered a faint, powerless smile.

The Toyota undercover patrol car driven by Leon Rokuhara hummed with a simulated engine noise as it turned at the intersection of Waseda-dori and Nakasugi-dori. Sitting in the passenger seat, Silva frowned in confusion.

"Leon-san, isn't this the wrong way to go to Chofu?"

"Lunch, lunch. Animals get hungry if they're alive."

Silva stiffened, staring into space for a moment before shifting his gaze back to Leon.

"Leon-san."

"What?"

"If that is the case... there is no rationality in taking this path. If we followed the previous route to the Scientific Investigation Research Institute, there are sixty-three privately owned diners and twenty-eight family restaurants along the way. On the other hand, the route estimated from our current heading has less than one-tenth of that."

"What, did you look that up on the V-net?" Leon snorted.

Silva shook his head slightly. "No. I accessed the Mother computer's holomemory at the Metropolitan Police Department directly."

"The main office sure keeps a lot of useless data," Leon said as he stepped on the accelerator. The motor, boasting an output of over 50 kilowatts, let out a harsh high-pitched sound at the edge of the audible range, while a heavy bass sound meant to prevent danger to pedestrians cancelled it out. Trailing water vapor designed to mimic exhaust gas, the undercover car entered a crowded street.

Silva spoke as if to chide him. "I can understand what you want to say. If the only objective is nutritional replenishment, you are correct."

"Humans are irrational creatures," Leon replied. "In times like this, there's usually some other hidden purpose. If you're a research-type Boomer, try and guess what it is."

Silva stared into space again, a habit he seemed to have when processing calculations. Ten seconds passed without an answer. It was taking longer than before.

Leon said reassuringly, "Well, maybe it's too much for a brand-new Boomer like you..."

Focus returned to Silva's eyes. He looked at Leon and opened his mouth.

"Is it Nene Rokuhara-san? You intend to go check on her, don't you?"

A smile appeared on Leon's cheeks. "Yeah, you got it. You pass. Though it took you way too long."

"Thank you." Silva nodded, a faint smile-like expression appearing on his face. "Nene Rokuhara. A victim of yesterday's rampage incident and Leon Rokuhara's foster..."

"I don't need 'foster.' She's my sister." Leon cut Silva off, his smile vanishing. At the unexpectedly strong tone, Silva's smile disappeared. The research Boomer bowed his head deeply.

"I apologize for using an expression that caused you discomfort."

"No, it's fine. Also, in times like this, don't say 'I apologize,' say 'I'm sorry.' When you act too formal, it makes my skin crawl."

"I apol...I'm sorry."

Having corrected himself, Silva gave a small nod. The smile returned to Leon's cheeks.

"Anyway, we just need to be at the Research Institute by 16:00. In the meantime, there should be enough time to check the status of yesterday's victim. It's part of the investigation."

Hearing this, Silva tilted his head. Leon grimaced. "What, still got a complaint?"

"No... I was just wondering what would happen to the meal."

Leon laughed. "Don't worry. I have a plan. Actually, there's a butcher shop called 'Matsunaga Meat Shop' near Nene's high school. Their beef croquettes are famous. We'll grab some there."

A red light appeared ahead. Leon slowly applied the brakes. The motor, losing power, suppressed its growl. Leon suddenly grew curious and spoke to Silva.

"By the way, can you eat things?"

"I am capable. I have a sense of taste and the vocabulary to describe it."

Leon shrugged at the phrasing. The forgotten pain in his neck resurfaced, and he gave a bitter smile. 'Matsunaga Meat Shop' was just ahead.

They were close enough to hear the conversation between a customer and the shopkeeper, a stout woman who looked like a quintessential "gutsy mother" figure. Nene was humming happily. The melody and lyrics had changed since a moment ago.

"Inside the croquette is a croquette, is this a croquette matryoshka?, every time you tap one, the croquettes increase!"

It was a nonsensical song. Priss wore a complicated smile. Nene was a bit strange, but she had no malice. In fact, she realized that Nene's total lack of caution and guard was the reason she couldn't bring herself to hate the girl.

I guess I just have to accept it. It's a bond forged through death, Priss thought, slightly surprised at her own willingness to accept the situation.

At that moment, a sedan pulled up in front of the shop. Priss felt a bad premonition. Both doors opened, and two men appeared: one with a sturdy, athletic build, and the other a somewhat cool, handsome man.

The athletic man stepped up to the counter without hesitation and shouted to the shopkeeper.

"Auntie, six beef croquettes!"

"Sorry, I only have five left right now!"

"Really? Then I'll take all five! Can you wrap them in two, two, and one?"

"Sure thing, sorry about that."

Priss watched the scene in stunned silence. Now that the half-price fried rice from Hongkon-tei was gone, the beef croquettes from Matsunaga Meat Shop were her last hope. And that hope was being snatched away right before her eyes. A cry from her soul escaped her lips.

"W-w-w-wait a minute! No, please wait!"

The athletic man attempting to monopolize her hope turned toward Priss. Leon's eyes caught sight of a high school girl who looked familiar.

"Big brother!"

The voice that followed immediately cut off Leon's attempt to remember where he'd seen her, pulling his consciousness from "detective" back to "private citizen."

Leon's face broke into a grin. He caught Nene as she flew toward him, spun her around in the air a few times, then set her down and patted her head.

"Nene, why are you here?"

"Well, I came to buy lunch!"

"I see, me too. Want to eat together?"

"Uh, well..." Nene looked a bit troubled. Leon noticed the meaning of her look.

"If you have a friend, let's eat together. Food tastes better when everyone eats together, right?"

Priss stood by awkwardly, watching the exchange.

"I guess it can't be helped, since Nene said so. Right, Nene?"

Without answering Priss's question, Nene turned back with her troubled face. "Priss-chan, my brother says we should eat lunch together!"

Recognizing who Nene's "friend" was, Leon couldn't help but shout.

"What the hell, it's Priss Asagiri!?"

Priss, realizing the identity of the athletic man, shouted back. The mortal enemy who had subjected her to that suspicious interrogation last night was now trying to steal her beef croquettes, and he was the brother Nene cherished most.

"You're Leon Rokuhara!"

"Oh? Big brother, are you already friends with Priss-chan?"

"Yeah, the kind of 'friend' written as 'formidable foe.' No objections, right?"

Priss wore a savage smile. That was exactly what she wanted.

"That's right, Nene. We're 'formidable foes.' Hmph."

Hearing this, Leon grimaced. "Don't call my sister by her name so casually."

Leon spat the words out triumphantly. "Ha! A transparent lie! Nene is clearly troubled..."

"Big brother, who is this person? Your friend?" Nene asked, looking at Silva.

Caught off guard, Leon wore a look of surprise.

"Oh, right, I haven't introduced him. This is Silva. He's my... latest partner."

He couldn't tell a victim of a runaway Boomer incident that Silva was a "research-type Boomer."

"Nice to meet you. I am Silva, and I have been assigned to be Leon-san's partner. I look forward to working with you."

"I'm Nene! Nene Rokuhara. Nice to meet you!"

Nene held out both hands to Silva. He took them with a smile. It was a scene of pure peace, but Priss, her confrontation interrupted, didn't like the situation. She cleared her throat and spoke to Leon.

"Sorry to break up the happy gathering, but can we deal with this later?"

This time, it was the auntie from the meat shop who interrupted.

"Five croquettes, ready! That'll be 600 yen!"

"Right," Leon responded. Without taking his eyes off Priss, he took a debit card from his wallet and pressed it against the register. He checked the price and hit the payment button.

"Thanks as always, auntie!"

Leon turned back to Priss with a grin. "Is it bad to have a happy gathering, 'Priss-chan'?"

"Not at all. I just wonder if you could hand over those croquettes."

Nene, seeing the two of them addressing each other with the same names but with obvious malice, clapped her hands.

"I know! There are five, right? Let's share them one by one. It'll be delicious if we all eat!"

"Hmm, that's an idea, but I think there's a better way."

Priss clasped her hands and rotated her arms, making a cracking sound. Leon smirked as he saw this. He opened his left palm and slammed his right fist into it. A sharp *crack* echoed through the short arcade.

"You're right. Simple methods are best for these things, aren't they, 'Priss-chan'?"

Leon tried to roll his neck but winced at the forgotten pain. Priss's face twisted into a mocking grin as she realized the cause.

"I don't know who did that to you, but it looks uncool. Are you okay with that patch on?"

Seeing the puzzled gazes of Nene and Silva, Leon swallowed whatever he was about to say.

"If you don't remember, fine. Anyway, it's none of your business. A detective deals with a lot of things."

"Hmph, I don't know what it's like, but being a public servant seems like a pain," Priss said, her smile deepening. "So, what are the rules?"

"No weapons. No eye-gouging. Other than that... as long as we don't bother the passersby, it's fine."

"OK. Quick to the point."

"Wait a minute. What do the two of you intend to do?" Silva cut in. He didn't seem shaken, but Priss and Leon locked eyes.

Priss opened her mouth. "What else? An exhibition match."

"Exactly, I was thinking the same thing," Leon said, and Priss nodded vigorously.

Silva scolded them calmly. "You cannot. If the main office finds out a police officer is fighting in broad daylight on a public road..."

Leon countered. "You've got the wrong idea, Silva. I told you, it's an exhibition."

"How is that different from a fight?"

"If you don't understand, just shut up and watch."

"Yep, shut up and watch. Come on, Sil-chan, over here!" Nene pulled Silva's hand.

"Sil-chan...?"

With a blank face, Silva was dragged away while staring into the void. He was likely pulling information from the Metropolitan Police database or the V-net to find out what "Sil-chan" meant.

Priss spoke sympathetically. "Having that airhead as a partner... you must have it tough."

"Life has its ups and downs," Leon said, shaking his head.

Priss shrugged. "If you understand that much, then just hand over a beef croquette or two."

"If I hand over two, I won't have any left. That's that, and this is this."

Priss put her right foot forward and raised her hands slightly high. "Then I guess we have to do this."

Leon put his left foot forward and took a boxing stance. "I guess we do!"

No sooner had he spoken than he threw a right Russian hook. Priss read the trajectory perfectly. It wasn't a move meant to hit; he was likely testing her skill. *In that case!*

She quickly lowered her body. Maintaining a crouching posture, she extended her left leg and spun around in a full circle. Caught by the leg sweep, Leon lost his balance.

"A leg sweep! Haven't seen one of those in person in a while!" the auntie's voice rang out.

Priss smiled. To think there was someone here who knew the techniques of the King of Destruction!

But the title of detective wasn't just for show. He endured the attack that should have knocked him on his backside, only stumbling slightly.

"Tch!"

Leon clicked his tongue and delivered a middle kick. Priss decided it was too dangerous to stay in her crouching position. She arched her body back and placed her hands on the ground. Leon's kick passed just over Priss's stomach.

Priss raised her hips, entering a handstand position and opening her legs. Using her hands as a pivot, she spun and swept Leon's torso. Immediately after, she heard him groan in pain.

"Capoeira! That was magnificent!" the auntie shouted again. She seemed to be a martial arts enthusiast.

However, being distracted by that voice led to a momentary opening. By the time Priss stood up after a turn and a half, Leon was already right behind her, attempting to trap her neck with his right arm.

"Sorry, but your afternoon classes are cancelled," Leon said to her with plenty of confidence. He intended to choke her out with a sleeper hold.

But with those words, Priss became certain of victory. Leon had shown an opening he shouldn't have. She reached both hands behind her head and wrapped them around Leon's neck. Fixing his neck to her shoulder, she swung both legs forward and sat down hard.

"A Stunner! Good lord, it's just like Stone Cold!"

The auntie's shout coincided with Leon's jaw slamming into Priss's shoulder. She let go and stood up. Leon held his head, swaying. The heavy blow to his jaw had likely rattled his brain. *Now!*

She moved behind Leon. The auntie, realizing what Priss's movement meant, shouted: "A backdrop!"

As she said, Priss locked her hands around Leon's waist, dropped her hips, and threw him over her head. "A Thesz-style belly-to-back!"

Priss arched into a beautiful bridge. With a thud, Leon hit the soft, grass-covered road surface. Priss held the position. *The auntie will definitely do it.* It was just as she thought.

The auntie shouted, "One, two, three! With a backdrop hold, the winner is Priss Asagiri!"

"Wow, Priss-chan!"

At Nene's words, Priss gave a thumbs-up. Nene nodded and returned a powerful thumbs-up. Priss pointed her index finger at Silva, who seemed stunned.

"I win. His beef croquettes are mine!"

"Ow, ow, ow, ow..."

Leon regained consciousness ten minutes later. As he woke, Silva spoke to him.

"Good morning, Leon."

"In times like this, you say 'Are you okay?' not 'Good morning.'" Leon shook his head in response and sat up, looking around. He had been carried into the undercover patrol car. Nene was already gone, and there was no sign of Priss Asagiri.

The answer was obvious, but he asked Silva just in case. "Where are they?"

"They went home. I have messages for you from Nene-san and Priss-san."

Leon groaned. *Damn it, I didn't mean to let my guard down just because she was a girl.* Then he remembered something important. He asked Silva:

"Hey, what happened to my croquettes?"

"Priss-san took them. She said it was the winner's right."

Leon groaned, grinding his teeth. "Damn it, I paid for those!"

"They were the prize for the 'exhibition,' weren't they?"

"Listen, you!"

To the shouting Leon, Silva said calmly, "You weren't having a private brawl, were you?"

Leon couldn't say "That's exactly what it was" and was at a loss for words. "O-oh. Of course not."

"I was wondering if I needed to report this to the main office," Silva replied with a strange expression. It was a truly mysterious look, a mix of earnestness and machine-like nature, the face of a reporter unmoved by emotion.

Damn it, that Chief. This was his plan all along. Attaching an inflexible, unnecessary bell to me.

While Leon was silently hurling curses at Ninomiya, Silva spoke.

"However, that was a magnificent pro-wrestling match. I could estimate some of the attack patterns from that stance. It unfolded almost exactly as expected."

Leon's anger exploded. "You! Tell me that kind of thing beforehand!"

Chapter 3: Scratch Soul

On a 3D display, a girl appeared. Judging by the fact that she was holding a guitar, it was likely a live video. A man was watching this footage. A satisfied smile played across his lips. In fact, he was satisfied; this video had been filmed solely for him. From an unnatural angle, slightly above and behind the stage, the girl said hesitantly:

"I want to sing more, but... I have a curfew. Just one last song."

The girl in the video readjusted her guitar. The man picked up a guitar beside him. He timed his sound as if having a session with the video. The girl's mouth moved:

"Please listen to a new song I just made, one that no one has heard yet!"

The sound of a black-bodied Les Paul with white binding echoed from Marshall speakers. Tapping his foot to the rhythm, the man added backing to the riff played by the girl in the video, Priss Asagiri.

On the top floor of the only massive office building in Marunouchi, a Les Paul Custom rang out with a pleasant sound.

Just outside the linear ticket gates of Tokyo Station, between the Babasaki Moat and Hibiya Moat that surround the Imperial Palace, lies the area known as Marunouchi. It was an area lined with buildings of companies belonging to Japan's leading conglomerates.

From the beginning of the 21st century, the area was heavily affected by a recession that lasted twenty years. Companies withdrew or were acquired due to poor performance, and there was a time when it seemed the former glory had been swept away into the distant past.

At that time, an emerging advanced company achieved a groundbreaking invention. This invention had a lower lifecycle cost than hiring illegal immigrant labor, did not mind dangerous work, and could withstand long working hours. It was truly ideal as a supplement or replacement for labor.

The emerging company actively provided labor to large corporations. This prevented companies from relocating overseas in search of cheap labor and functioned effectively as a provider of "3d" (dangerous, dirty, and demanding) labor.

2025. In the capital regeneration plan called "Tokyo Restruction," eighty percent of this district was entrusted to that emerging advanced company. Through this, Japanese industry, which had been on the verge of ruin, caught its breath. Even for the major conglomerate companies that used to lead the region, management would be impossible without this company.

Now, there is only one building in Marunouchi. A massive square pyramid, some 250 meters high, double the height of the Great Pyramid of Khufu in Egypt. This building, which covers four blocks of Marunouchi, was constructed in just three years using unique technology held by the emerging company. Its outer walls are covered in milky-white marble, and the way it gradually takes on a faint tint as the morning sun rises made it a symbol of the new Japan. This sight drew attention, and the modern pyramid was now becoming a world-famous tourist attraction.

Tourists who witnessed this modern miracle looked on with curiosity, but at the same time, with a somewhat uneasy gaze. There was likely an instinctive fear toward the company that built it. The name of the company headquartered here was the Genom Corporation. It was a non-public company composed of members with unlimited liability, and the only company in the world that could provide the artificial lifeforms known as "Boomers."

The man serving as its president was Mason Childes. He was the man playing the Les Paul while watching the 3D monitor.

Mason played the guitar, forgetting the urgency of the approval documents. He believed that Priss's performance was emotional enough to be worth immersing himself in above all else.

Technically, there were still many elements to be improved. The rhythm occasionally faltered on fast phrases, and the balance between vocal volume and pitch would break down. But such things were not a major problem. Priss possessed the most important thing for an artist who creates an era, especially for a rocker.

To doubt and resist common sense and the system. And to remain an outsider. That overflowed in her sound. This was not something that someone could teach; it was something one had to grasp for oneself. In his view, Priss Asagiri possessed those two things at a high level.

Having seen Priss's performance video posted on a V-net 3D video distribution site, he trembled with a fresh surprise welling up from the bottom of his heart. He was even certain that he was truly lucky to have encountered the emergence of a new artist.

Mason truly regretted that he couldn't participate in the live show held at "Bayside Hall" due to a little "business." That was why he ordered his subordinates to replace the surveillance cameras at Bayside Hall, to obtain this footage. He had no sense of wrongdoing; for him, not being able to appreciate Priss Asagiri's live show was far more sinful.

As the interlude toward the final phrase began, Mason felt a slight pain in his heart. Yes, right after this...!

With a roar, the 3D image grew distorted. The surveillance camera fell from the ceiling, and the image was fixed at a strange angle.

"Everyone, run!" Priss's voice echoed.

Yes. Her debut live show came to a musical end with the intrusion of the runaway Boomer. But Mason thought differently, a slight smile appearing on his lips. He believed the climax of "Priss Asagiri's Live" began from here.

He readjusted his Les Paul and began tuning it down a full step. After finishing a manual tuning that was as accurate as a machine, he began to play the intro, a slow, lyrical phrase. Within the overturned surveillance camera, the runaway Boomer was slowly beginning to rise.

Mason's intro ended. At the same time, Priss Asagiri grabbed the neck of her Dark Fire with both hands and leaped magnificently into the air. He smiled, sliding his left fingers down the neck to begin a frenzied fast-playing solo. Priss's blow slammed into the Boomer's head.

The Boomer's head flew off. That moment was the climax for Mason. He even thought the live show had existed for the sake of this impulsive destruction.

White noise hissed from the surround sound system. He stopped playing, feeling the lingering vibration of the guitar strings across his whole body. He felt a slight ecstasy. He closed his eyes. This live show should have ended here, as a Priss Asagiri show. And yet...

A faint artificial sound could be heard through the silence. It was a police siren. Mason grimaced. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and let go of the Les Paul. He spoke to himself while feeling the weight of the mahogany digging into his shoulder.

"The police are so tactless. A perfect live show, ruined."

Mason took the guitar strap from his neck and sat on a nearby sofa. The luxurious sofa made of high-quality genuine leather received his well-proportioned body.

"If all humans had as much courage as she does, we would never have been born," he muttered, snapping his fingers while looking toward a corner of the room.

The image on the 3D display projected in space distorted slightly, likely accessing the holomemory. As expected, the image switched after a few moments.

A large image of a pier appeared. Foreigners who looked like the Russian Mafia were in a fierce gunbattle with the AD-POLICE. He watched expressionlessly; he had no interest in conflicts between humans.

It was only when a Boomer suddenly went berserk and fused with an SUV that the smile finally returned to Mason's face. He watched the fusion of the Boomer and the machine with satisfaction. The runaway Boomer blew away both the mafia and the armed police. It was overwhelming combat power. His mouth loosened significantly.

He was the one who had leaked the smuggling information to the foolish police. He had orchestrated the battle with the AD-POLICE and conducted a field test of the new nanomachine.

As a result, everything was as planned. Mason was satisfied with the runaway Boomer's fighting style. While there was the reckless act of the AD-POLICE dropping the Boomer into Priss Asagiri's live venue, there was also the unexpected byproduct of discovering a new charm of hers.

Mason was satisfied. Now, he could restart the terrorism by runaway Boomers that had been suppressed since the establishment of the AD-POLICE. He could resume the resistance against humanity.

But there was also an element of concern: the armored warriors who had intruded while Priss and another were resisting fiercely. This was something not in his calculations.

More than ten years since the announcement and start of sales of Boomers, there should be almost no organization on this planet capable of resisting Genom, which he led. Genom was too large an opponent for a private company to oppose, and nations above mid-tier could no longer exist without Genom. Genom was that prominent.

And yet, there were those trying to oppose him and Genom. Mason twisted his lips and snapped his fingers. The 3D monitor image vanished, and the speakers went silent. With a stern face, he walked to the window with his arms crossed and looked down.

Far below was Marunouchi. He could see the Marunouchi Building, half-destroyed and not rebuilt, the result of terrorism he had orchestrated. But even seeing that sight of a past achievement did not clear Mason's mind.

The bell rang, signaling the time of liberation. Priss gave a big stretch. For her, the time spent in Classical Chinese class was full of mystery. In the modern age, arranging kanji to write poetry should be impossible for anyone but the Chinese. At the very least, Priss had no intention of doing it at a live show.

Anyway, it was now after school, the most precious time for a high school student. There were various ways to enjoy it that were only possible during high school, such as putting effort into club activities, holing up in the library, or enjoying tea time on the way home.

However, Priss was interested in none of those. She didn't belong to any specific club, and her grades weren't that bad. Tea time was something she looked forward to, but not today. For her, there was little point in staying at school.

"Wait up~"

A frantic yet carefree voice echoed in the bicycle parking lot. She pretended not to hear it. She was done with the owner of that voice. She had a premonition that something bad would happen. She looked left and right, searching for her bicycle.

Priss clicked her tongue at the unexpected loss of time. She had been in a great hurry this morning, so she couldn't park in her usual spot. She was frantic. If she didn't hurry, she would be caught by that carefree devil. She had to escape from here somehow.

She finally found her Alex Moulton. She ran up to it and grabbed the handlebars. She let out a large breath and was about to take a step when...

"Priss-cha-a-an, found you!"

"Hyaah!"

At Nene's voice, Priss reflexively let go of the bicycle handlebars. Something cold ran down her spine. From behind her, she heard the sound of the bicycle falling.

"Wait, Priss-chan, the bike! This is expensive, isn't it?"

The person who caused the fall spoke quite easily. She heard Nene's panicked voice. Priss remained stunned, responding powerlessly.

"O-oh. Yeah, I guess."

"Honestly, even if it's a folding bike, you shouldn't be rough with it. You have to use it carefully."

Priss came to her senses at Nene's words. She hurriedly bent down and checked the frame. It was a bit muddy, but there seemed to be no particular problem.

Wait!

Priss came to her senses. She stood tall and pointed her index finger at Nene. "Why are you following me!"

"Because we're friends! Let's go home together."

Priss let out a sigh. She thought it wouldn't be bad to be with Nene, then she gave a bitter smile. She realized she had accepted Nene's proposal to some extent. But then, she realized an important fact. Priss spoke in a somewhat softer tone than before.

"No, but... anyway, Nene, where do you live?"

"Where do you live, Priss-chan?"

"Don't answer a question with a question! OK, I get it, I get it. Koenji."

Priss answered reluctantly as she saw Nene puff out her cheeks. She felt the injustice of the world. How strong were people who didn't listen to others!

Hearing the answer, Nene responded with a smile. "Yay, Nene is in Nishi-Ogikubo. We're going the same way~"

"How is that the same way? It's the exact opposite!"

Priss denied it loudly. Nishi-Ogikubo Station and Koenji Station were on opposite sides of Ogikubo Station, the closest station to the school on the Chuo Line. They were absolutely, under no circumstances, in the same direction.

Nene tilted her head and said curiously, "If you look at it from Shinjuku, it's the same direction."

"Where around here is Shinjuku!"

Priss let out another sigh. Nene's thought process was too mysterious. Is she really human? That thought even crossed her mind. She shook her head. She'd had enough of runaway Boomers, AD-POLICE, and mysterious juniors for today. Right now, she just wanted to go home, do nothing, and sleep.

Priss changed her mindset. Anyway, it was the opposite direction from Nene. She would emphasize that.

"Nah, but by bike, it's the opposite direction! That's too bad, hahahaha!"

She patted Nene's shoulder repeatedly. She got on her beloved Alex Moulton as casually as possible. She carefully adjusted the pedal position so she could dash at full power. Once she had the perfect position, she gave Nene's shoulder one last strong pat.

"See ya, Nene! See you tomorrow!"

No sooner had she spoken than Priss put power into the pedals. A perfect dash. The Alex Moulton flew out of the parking lot with tremendous momentum, leaving Nene behind.

From behind, she heard Nene's voice. "Priss-chan!"

She seemed quite frantic. For Nene, she was speaking quickly. Priss looked back. She saw Nene with both hands cupped around her mouth, using them as a megaphone. She seemed to be desperately trying to say something.

Priss shouted back. "Say it f-a-a-a-s-t!"

The sharp sound of metal hitting metal and the dull sound of something soft hitting followed.

"Ow, ow, ow..."

Priss groaned from the pain attacking her whole body. There were no fractures or bruises. It was likely because she hadn't gained much speed yet. It was a miracle that she'd only suffered this much after hitting a truck.

"As expected of Priss-chan!"

Nene spoke happily. Even though it was the opposite direction, for some reason she had followed. Priss asked without looking back.

"Why are you following me?"

Priss's conscience hurt just a bit. If Nene was that desperate, maybe she should talk to her properly. As she thought that, Nene's loud voice reached her ears.

"Priss-chan, look out!"

Look out?

Priss shifted her gaze forward. Right in front of her, she saw a large silver wall, the opening to a beverage vending machine replenishment truck.

"Well, you see, I got a message on my smart communicator earlier. From my dad. He said, 'I want to thank her, so go see where Priss-san's house is.'"

Nene's voice sounded carefree but slightly strained. It was likely difficult for her to keep up with Priss's pace. Even knowing that, Priss stepped on the pedals as usual. This rhythm was ingrained in her body.

Priss pedaled with all her might, her legs pumping furiously. She had reached a point where she simply could not change course now. Beside her, she responded to Nene without even a hint of labored breath.

"I told you, I don't need any thanks. Besides, if you're so worried, you should have just asked your 'big brother' for help!"

"Big brother... he hates that kind of thing," Nene replied, her voice far more winded than Priss's. Her exhaustion was becoming apparent, though Priss paid it no mind, focusing only on the girl's words with a frustrated grind of her teeth. "He says it's... mixing public and private business."

That beef-croquette bastard! Priss thought. *Acting like a goody-two-shoes only when it's convenient!* Still, she knew his logic was sound; having a high sense of duty as a public servant wasn't a bad thing. The only real problem was that it resulted in Nene following her all the way home. Priss stole a glance back. The gap between them was widening. Nene was tiring.

Now's my chance, she realized. "Listen, don't you dare follow me!" she shouted.

Priss poured more power into the pedals. The straightaway of Waseda Street stretched long before her. If she went all-out here, she could shake off this mysterious lifeform claiming to be her junior. Or so she thought. As she stared ahead with renewed determination, she suddenly realized her mistake.

Five meters above her hung a round, red light, an absolute authority that stopped man and vehicle alike.

A red signal.

Priss's shoulders slumped in defeat. Nene caught up, a triumphant look plastered across her face. It was then that a silent electric vehicle pulled up beside them. Priss noticed that the high-frequency hum of its motor was barely audible; only a truly high-end car could manage that.

She shifted her gaze slightly and her eyes widened. It was a Bentley. Its deep green body radiated an unconditional sense of luxury, quietly advertising the very definition of "top-tier." That wasn't all, this Bentley had been modified into a limousine. Specifically, a rare six-wheeled limousine. Stunned by the sheer extravagance, Priss couldn't help but stare.

As if triggered by her gaze, the rear window began to slide down.

Crap! Priss paled. She worried they might think she was picking a fight. Because of the tinted glass, she couldn't tell who was inside, but considering the price of the car, it couldn't be anyone ordinary. Whether it was a yakuza boss running the underworld

or a corrupt merchant pulling the strings of politicians, it certainly wasn't anyone normal.

As Priss froze, the tinted glass finished lowering. *Man, even the windows in nice cars are silent*, she thought, an out-of-place observation for the situation.

Priss steeled herself. *To hell with this. I can't be an artist if I'm scared of some shadowy mastermind*. She decided she would give them a piece of her mind. She took a deep breath, preparing for an explosive confrontation.

"Good day to you."

A young woman spoke to her. The voice was intelligent and refined. The sudden politeness completely threw Priss off. If her instincts were right, the speaker was still in her teens, likely the same age as Priss herself.

A rich girl? We live in different worlds... Priss felt half-relieved. Likely, this was some debutante who had grown curious about the "commoner" staring at her car and opened the window on a whim.

Her guess was only half-right. The girl who had addressed her had a bright, clever face, but she appeared to be a maid.

"Good day," the maid-girl said again from within the car, her voice remaining elegant and calm. "You are Priss-san, correct? It is a pleasure to meet you. My name is Linna."

"Linna-chan! Hello!" Nene chirped back innocently.

The girl in the car offered a soft smile. Her intellectual features suited the maid uniform strangely well.

She spoke pleasantly. "Would you mind listening to what we have to share?"



Priss caught on instantly. *Another* scout from a record company. This had happened occasionally since she started posting videos on V-Net, though she had never been approached by someone in a Bentley before. However, Priss wasn't particularly interested in making money through rock. She played because she "liked it" and "wanted to."

She understood that becoming a professional didn't always mean doing what you wanted. Besides, she didn't even know what she wanted to be yet. Seventeen was far too young to decide the rest of her life. Without a moment's hesitation, she spoke clearly.

"I'm not signing any contracts."

"It is not quite that," Linna began.

"I'm an artist. I'm not doing swimsuit shots, and I have no intention of appearing on variety shows!" Priss puffed out her chest, confident in her decision.

She heard a sigh from the girl named Linna. "Please, just listen to what we have to say."

"She's right, Priss-chan," Nene added.

"You shut up!" Priss snapped back reflexively. She knew it was an overreaction, but for some reason, she felt compelled to argue with everything Nene said.

"Linna. Words are wasted on an idiot who won't listen."

A new voice called out from the depths of the Bentley. Like Linna's, it was the voice of a young girl. Priss craned her neck. In the far seat, a girl dressed in Gothic Lolita fashion was quietly tilting a tea cup. The amber liquid was surely tea, not brandy. The "Lady" of the car spoke in a cold, enchanting tone reminiscent of a masked queen.

"Meiei, I don't mind. Do it."

"Understood, Lady Sylia."

Priss thought she heard the voice of a mature man. In the next instant, the center and rear gull-wing doors swung wide. With a mechanical clatter, the doors transformed into shapes resembling the claws of a crab.

The two mechanical arms snatched up Priss, Nene, and their bicycles. In a heartbeat, the two girls were tossed into the center seats of the vehicle. Their bikes were instantly folded and stowed in the trunk. The entire process took less than 0.5 seconds. The arms retracted, and the doors slammed shut with such precision that not a single seam could be found.

The light turned green. The Bentley, now carrying Priss and Nene against their will, pulled away as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

"It looks like we'll make it in time," Silva said to Leon from the passenger seat.

Leon scowled. "That's only because you didn't know how to eat a beef bowl."

"My memory banks indicated that adding fermented soybeans and raw egg to a beef bowl was a taboo," Silva replied.

".....Someone else used to say that too," Leon said, a nostalgic smile flickering on his face. He cleared his throat and continued. "Even so, you didn't have to freeze up just because I added natto and an egg."

"I am sorry... My apologies."

"Whatever."

Leon looked up at a sign spanning the Hitomi Highway: Chofu Techno-Babylon - 3km.

Techno-Babylon was a high-tech industrial park in Western Tokyo, born from the "Tokyo Restructuring" project that was transforming the capital. Chofu Airport had originally been a site of many issues; despite its prime location, its use for aviation was problematic. The restructuring project naturally eyed the land. There was no sense in letting tens of thousands of square meters in the heart of the capital sit idle for an underused airfield.

Airport functions were integrated into the dual-use Yokota Air Base. The planners initially struggled with what to do with the Chofu site. Tokyo already had financial centers, government districts, and universities. Furthermore, being inland made it poor for water-based logistics. Eventually, they settled on its current form: a high-tech industrial hub.

It wasn't a place for heavy machinery production, but rather a cluster of R&D facilities for major corporations. High-tech research didn't require heavy logistics and offered high value through intellectual productivity. It was the path chosen for a Japan recovering from a long recession.

The Metropolitan Police followed suit, placing their Advanced Technology Institute in Techno-Babylon. They established the Second Forensic Science Laboratory, known as

"Nikaiken", to deal with crimes involving nanotechnology and molecular engineering. Within Nikaiken was a department directly linked to Leon and the AD Police: the Boomer Technology Division.

Leon navigated the labyrinthine corridors of Nikaiken with practiced ease, climbing stairs and passing through security doors.

"These paths are quite confusing. I am surprised you do not get lost," Silva remarked.

"I know this place is a maze, so I checked the map beforehand," Leon answered.

The investigative Boomer smiled. "According to my calculations, an ordinary person has a 98% probability of getting lost. In that event, there is a 68% probability they would ask for directions or consult a map."

Leon looked annoyed. "You're not a machine, so stop... wait, never mind."

He knew his partner was a biological machine, but Silva looked, spoke, and acted like a human. Leon found himself wondering just how different "it" really was from a person. They walked in silence for another five minutes until they reached the desired laboratory. Leon reached for the intercom, hesitating for a fraction of a second.

"Is something wrong?" Silva asked.

Leon grimaced and pressed the button. With the hiss of compressed air, the doors slid open. The master of the room turned around, her long hair swaying. She glanced at the clock on the wall and smiled.

"16:00 sharp. As always, the only thing you're accurate about is time, Leon."

"Don't start, Claire. I'm not alone today."

Claire blinked in surprise as Silva stepped into view. "Who is he...?"

"This is Silva. An investigative Boomer and, well, my partner," Leon said, sounding a bit put off. He didn't like the way Claire was looking at Silva. Still, he had to introduce them properly; he had learned today that investigative Boomers could suffer unexpected freezes if social protocols weren't followed.

"This is Claire. Claire Shinohara. An investigator with Nikaiken's Boomer Unit."

"Hello, Claire," Silva said.

The familiarity in Silva's voice and the way Claire wouldn't take her eyes off him grated on Leon's nerves. *Dammit, who designed this Boomer with a face like that?* Leon glared at Silva. Looking closely, the Boomer's eyes somewhat resembled his own. It reminded him of something Claire had said back when they were students in the same lab: *"I like those eyes of yours."*

Eight years had passed since then. They both got busy, time slipped away, and they had drifted apart. Leon shook his head. It was in the past.

"Claire, what's the status of the analysis?"

"Analysis?" Claire asked dreamily.

Leon frowned. "You know what I mean. The remains of the Boomer that fell into the live house yesterday."

"You really are a boor. Always thinking about the investigation," Claire sighed, shrugging her shoulders. "I stayed up all night, and not even a word of thanks. So insensitive."

"It's your job, isn't it?"

"I take it you still don't have a girlfriend? Such a waste of a good-looking man." Claire sighed again and operated a remote, dimming the lights. "Leon, step back. I'll project it here."

A 3D monitor projected a holographic image of a blocky crystal structure with what looked like paramecium cilia attached to it.

"Leon, surely you know what this is."

"Yeah. Nanomachines. And incredibly small ones at that."

"Exactly. Nanomachines miniaturized to the atomic level. I checked the head office's Holo-Memory and patent databases worldwide. These haven't been made public yet. They're a new model."

"What do they do?"

Claire looked at Silva and smiled. "I'm curious if Boomers get stiff shoulders. Maybe you should ask your partner later?"

Leon scowled, and she chuckled. "Just a joke. Their role is simple: they parasitize the AI unit to amplify regeneration, assimilation, and muscular structure. That's all."

"That's it?"

"Functionally, yes. But in the process, they completely destroy the thought circuits and control systems. If a Boomer is infected with these... it will almost certainly go berserk and turn into a monster. Simply put, it's a zombie virus that only affects Boomers."

"Claire, don't give me the layman's explanation," Leon grumbled.

"Oh? I thought your college knowledge had flown out with your bullets," she teased. "Anyway, I could tell you had a beef bowl with natto and egg before coming here. Honestly, you never change."

She trailed off, a silence falling between them that Leon couldn't quite read. "What about me?"

"Anyway, that's all I know after one night. If you want more detail, wait patiently."

Leon moved to his second query. "What about the mysterious armored warrior who supposedly defeated that Boomer? Any leads?"

He was skeptical of Priss Asagiri's testimony, especially since his sister, who was at the same location, claimed to have seen no such person. However, the physical evidence was hard to ignore: the berserk Boomer had been shredded by a mysterious material and sharp blades.

Claire shook her head. "You know the answer. Technically possible, but realistically impossible. To build such a suit would require an astronomical amount of funding. As Professor Togo used to say..."

"The production tech guy," Leon recalled with a wry smile. "'Don't stand behind me, get ahead of me.' He was always yelling at me."

Claire laughed. "For the cost of one of those suits, you could probably build a hundred Silvas."

"So if you have the money, it can be done," Leon pushed.

"Perhaps. But in reality, no such person or organization exists," Claire said firmly. "Just like there's no such thing as the 'perfect man' waiting around the corner."

Inside the Bentley, the mood was far less professional. Priss and Nene had been pulled into the luxury interior, and the car was now moving with a slight sense of acceleration. Sylia, the girl in the Gothic dress, was elegantly sipping tea.

"What's your goal?" Priss demanded.

"I simply wish for you to listen. As Linna has been saying," Sylia replied gracefully.

"Then why the rough treatment!?"

"Mind your language. Rough words create a rough personality."

"You kidnapped us!" Priss shouted, reaching out as if to grab her. Sylia calmly snapped her fingers. Suddenly, safety bars; much like those on a roller coaster, deployed from the leather seats, pinning Priss and Nene in place.

"Don't bother. Even a Boomer couldn't break those restraints," Sylia said.

Priss slumped. The bars were incredibly sturdy. Across from her, she realized Nene was already making herself at home, sipping tea and pointing at a dessert menu.

"Linna-chan, let's have this cake next!"

"The chocolate mille-feuille? Understood," Linna replied.

Priss felt the strength leave her body. Expecting common sense from Nene was a lost cause. She also realized how thirsty she was after pedaling so hard and shouting.

"Hey... I want a sip of that tea. My throat's parched."

"After laughing like that, I suppose it would be," Sylia teased, clearly not intending to share.

"My Lady," the driver's voice, Meiei interrupted. "An artist's throat is her life. I ask that you share some tea with her."

Sylia relented. "Very well, Meiei. For your sake, I shall offer some to this rude girl." She poured a cup of Darjeeling and handed it to Priss over the safety bar.

Priss took a sip, then immediately spat it out all over Sylia.

"Hey! Why is there sugar in this!? You've ruined the flavor!"

"What are you saying? Sugar in tea is common sense!" Sylia snapped, wiping her face.

"Are you a child?" Priss looked at her with pity. "No wonder you're such a shrimp."

"A... a... sh-shrimp!?" Sylia's face turned red. She reached out and pinched Priss's cheek. "I am still in my growth phase! Take it back!"

"Ow, ow, ow! That's it!" Priss yelled. If it was a fight, she wouldn't lose. She reached out and pinched Sylia's cheeks in return.

As the two girls engaged in a low-level scuffle of pinching and kicking, Nene and Linna continued their pleasant conversation about cake, completely ignoring the chaos.

Priss eventually managed to grab Sylia's leg and put her in an Achilles lock. Sylia gasped but refused to scream, her pride as a lady holding firm. Priss, realizing her lock wouldn't make her talk, changed tactics. She yanked off Sylia's shoe and began tickling the sole of her foot.

"Kootchie-kootchie-koo!"

The refined mask finally shattered. "Ahya! Stop it! hyahya! stop! Hyahyahya!"

Sylia collapsed into a fit of laughter and tears. In the driver's seat, Meiei sighed. "Birds of a feather, I suppose."

The sun set behind Chofu Techno-Babylon as Leon and Silva left the lab. Leon seemed drained.

"So... why did I..."

"Is something the matter?" Silva asked.

Leon straightened up. He couldn't look pathetic in front of his partner. "It's nothing. Just... Claire looked tired."

"She is indeed tired," Silva noted. "She often had that expression during my development project."

"Oh? And what were you doing then?"

"It was my development project," Silva repeated.

Leon realized he was talking to a machine. "Right. You're a new model. And if you were being developed a year ago..."

"Yes. Claire-san often complained that she couldn't see her boyfriend because of the secret project. She said she couldn't even tell 'Leon' about it."

Leon ground his teeth. If he could, he would go back to the day they broke up and tell himself the truth. But the past was set. "Fine. From now on, tell me everything related to me or the investigation upfront."

"Understood."

"Moving on. Forget the Boomer, what about that 'Armored Warrior'?"

"I shall search the network immediately."

"You won't find it there," Leon countered. "This isn't a big corporation thing. This smells like the hobby of some eccentric billionaire. Like those Middle Eastern tycoons who order custom supercars."

He looked at Silva. "And another thing. You've been relying on V-Net and Holo-Memory all day. Why?"

"Because the protocol dictates..."

"Forget the protocol. A detective investigates with their feet, wearing out their shoe leather. Remember that."

As Leon spoke, the limousine carrying Priss and the others descended deep into an underground parking garage. Priss finally gave up any hope of escape.

"Fine. You win. I won't run. Just let me out of this bar."

Sylia, still panting from the tickling attack and rubbing her sore legs, huffed. "So, you've finally decided to behave."

Priss ignored the jab, repeating a mantra of patience in her head. She had a feeling her life was about to get much more complicated.

The moment the safety bars retracted, the doors of the Bentley swung open. Priss stepped out into the parking garage, the hard sensation of unfinished concrete beneath her feet confirming they were deep underground.

Standing before them was a man in his fifties wearing formal butler's attire. This was the man Sylia had called Meiei. Once he confirmed that Priss and Nene had disembarked, he offered an elegant bow, his deep baritone echoing through the space.

"Welcome to the secret base of the 'Knight Sabers.' Please, follow me."

Meiei led them to an elevator. As the five of them stepped inside, the doors slid shut, and the car began a rapid descent. Amidst the long acceleration, Nene spoke up.

"Hey, Priss-chan. What kind of place is the 'Nighttime Helper Squad'?"

"Hah? What are you talking about, Nene?" Priss stared at her, wondering if her friend's habitual airheadedness had finally reached a critical level.

Nene looked back with a serious expression. "Well, this is the Knight Sabers' base, right? 'Knight' is like nighttime, and 'Sabers' sounds like 'Savers,' so... people who help?"

"How did you turn 'Knight Sabers' into a volunteer group!?" Sylia shouted, having finally rebooted her brain. She looked at Priss in disbelief. "What kind of education are you giving this girl?"

"Don't look at me! I'm not her guardian!"

"Anyway," Sylia said, lifting her chin as the elevator chimed at their destination. "You can see for yourselves what we are."

The doors opened to a vast, dimly lit room. As Priss's eyes adjusted, she realized the faint glows were coming from countless monitors displaying maps and streaming data.

"What is this?" Priss muttered. "Are you guys running some kind of investment firm?"

"We are the Knight Sabers," Linna said gently.

In one corner of the room, a locker-like housing rose from the floor, revealing a silhouette that Priss recognized. It was slender and feminine, topped with a helmet, the "armored warrior" from the live house.



Sylia had regained her composure, standing with the poise of a young noblewoman.
"Let's just say it was a fateful encounter."

"A fateful encounter, huh?" Priss scoffed. "So this is just some rich girl's hobby? I'm not interested in playing 'hero' with you. If you have this kind of gear, sell it to the police. I'm an amateur artist, and martial arts is just my hobby. This is a joke."

Priss turned to leave, but then Nene spoke. "I want to do it."

"Nene, do you know what you're saying!?" Priss yelled. "You could die! This isn't TV!"

"But Priss-chan," Nene said with a determination Priss had never seen. "Big brother has always been the one protecting me. If I can help him by doing this... I want to try."

"Fine! Do whatever you want! I'm out!"

Meiei, who had been watching in silence, finally spoke. "Priss-sama. You are a talented artist, but talent alone isn't enough to reach the top. You need equipment, support, and a team. If you aim to be a 'big artist,' you will eventually hit a wall."

Priss paused. Meiei was a strategist; he knew exactly which strings to pull. Her guitar had been destroyed in the previous night's chaos, and she was at a loss for how to replace it.

"We can provide the equipment and the support to break through that wall," Meiei continued.

Priss took a deep breath. "You'll really provide the gear?"

"The Knight Sabers never break their word. Isn't that right, My Lady?"

Sylia nodded quickly. "Of course! We never go back on our word!"

Meiei smiled brightly. "Excellent. Then we must prepare. My Lady shall handle the electronics and keyboards. Linna shall be on drums; she is excellent at keeping everyone together. And Nene-sama..." He tilted his head. "Perhaps the bass, to stand alongside Priss-sama."

"Wait, what are you talking about?" Sylia asked.

Meiei replied with a refreshing grin. "You are going to form a band with Priss-sama. That is what 'support and equipment' means, after all."

"I DIDN'T AGREE TO THAT!" Priss's roar filled the secret base.

Chapter 4: Shakedown

Koenji was a town that managed to feel distant even if it wasn't. By the 2030s, it still retained its "Showa era" atmosphere, with narrow streets and long arcades filled with independent shops rather than corporate chains.

Near the edge of the North Exit arcade sat *Moby Dick*, a music café. It was famous for two things: the owner's incredibly delicate hand-dripped coffee and his "Beef Sinew Curry," simmered until the collagen melted.

"Beef sinew curry, sorry for the wait," the owner, Gozo Shiozawa, said as he set the tray down.

Five people sat at the table: Sylia, Linna, Nene, Meiei, and a very grumpy-looking Priss. Gozo placed a plate in front of everyone except Priss.

"Hey, where's mine?" Priss grumbled.

Gozo flicked her forehead with a grin. "Get it yourself. Since when do you act like a customer in your own house?"

"I'm here as a guest today..."

"Did you say something?" Gozo asked, his voice low and "kind."

"No, Father. Nothing at all."

Priss stood up and walked stiffly toward the kitchen. Nene tilted her head. "What happened to Priss-chan?"

"Just a little father-daughter communication," Gozo replied.

The group began to eat. Meiei was visibly impressed by the atmosphere and the flavor. "This is wonderful. The air in this shop wasn't made; it was grown over time."

Meiei then turned the conversation toward the "band." He explained to Gozo that Sylia had "fallen in love" with Priss's voice and offered her a spot in their group, which Priss had "gladly accepted." Gozo looked at his daughter, who was nodding sheepishly.

"What's wrong, Priss? You always said you wanted to be in a band."

"Yeah, but... Dad, these guys are total amateurs," Priss whispered.

"Wow! This curry is amazing, Go-chan!" Nene shouted, her mouth full.

Priss froze. Her father was a master of the Sekishin-ryu Matsubayashi-ken style of martial arts and had a reputation for being a terror in his youth. Nobody called him "Go-chan." But Gozo just beamed.

"Glad you like it. I got some good cumin recently."

"Cumin?" Nene stopped eating, looking worried. "Where is the cumin from?"

"Ceylon. I've tried many, but their flavor is the best..."

"A 'ward resident's sound logic' (Seiron)? Which ward does he live in?" Nene asked, confusing the spice's origin with Japanese puns.

"Ward? I don't know, a tropical one?" Gozo replied, equally confused.

Priss slammed her water glass down. "IT'S NOT THAT KIND OF CUMIN!"

WHACK!

A loud, satisfying sound echoed as Gozo hit Priss over the head with a ladle he had seemingly pulled from thin air. "Watch your tone with the guests!"

"First, the instruments. Sylia and Linna already have a full keyboard set and a drum kit, right?" Priss continued after seeing the two nod. "Next, we need to get a bass for Nene. Alright, let's move; we're heading to the music store."

"Are we going to Ochanomizu?" Meiei asked. Since the Showa era, Ochanomizu had been known as the mecca for musical instrument shops. However, Priss gave a small shake of her head.

"No, I'm planning on going somewhere a bit different."

"Is there a good shop somewhere other than Ochanomizu? Shinjuku, Ikebukuro, or Shibuya?" Gozo tilted his head in confusion, prompting a smirk from Priss.

"Akihabara is known as an IT town, so there are plenty of DTM (Desktop Music) shops. But because of that, high-end vintage string instruments tend to gather there to target the 'nouveau riche.' Just the other day, I saw some bald old collector buy a 'Big Three' guitarist's sunburst Les Paul with millions in cold hard cash."

"Why do you think the key to the case is in Akihabara?" Sylva asked Leon from the passenger seat of their undercover EV patrol car.

Leon curled the corner of his mouth into a smirk and shot back a mocking question. "Can't you figure that out with your fancy search function?"

Sylva froze. His eyes lost focus, drifting toward something far away, and he remained rigid for a full ten seconds. Leon did a double-take at his partner, momentarily worried that he had broken the machine with an impossible question.

However, his concern was misplaced. Light returned to Sylva's eyes as he looked back at Leon. "I do not know. I have performed data collation across all possible patterning, but I could not establish a matching hypothesis."

"That's why I told you... investigation is about..."

"Legwork. However, how exactly...?" Having his next line stolen by Sylva, Leon shrugged and answered the question with another question. "Did you see the email from Claire this morning?"

"The list of parts from the runaway Boomer investigated by the Second Research Division?"

"Yeah, that's the one," Leon agreed, nodding. He drifted into a brief thought; *Claire really is a sweetheart, always looking out for a guy like me who plays it by ear...*

"Leon-san?" Sylva prompted, wondering why Leon had gone silent.

Tch, what a tactless guy... well, he is a machine. Leon gave a wry smile and resumed the conversation, trying not to let his internal thoughts show. "From that list, we already know that runaway Boomer was illegally manufactured. Among those parts was something handled only by a black-market dealer I happen to know."

"A black-market dealer...?" Sylva frowned. Leon answered the unspoken question lingering in the investigative Boomer's expression.

"He's not a dangerous guy. If anything, he's a parts dealer for illegal Boomers intended for sexual companionship."

"But, maintaining an unofficial relationship with a criminal..." Sylva froze for a split second. Perhaps accessing tax records, he opened his eyes wide and asked Leon in bewilderment, "Looking at his sales volume, he falls into the category of being quite successful. Since his income is so plentiful, I do not understand the reason for him to involve himself in illegal acts. Why?"

The light changed just as Leon was about to speak, so he stepped on the accelerator. He glanced at Sylva and replied.

"If you make your hobby your main business, the fun disappears. That's why you need a job that makes more money than your hobby."

"Here it is. This is the place."

Leon continued as he slowed the car for a red light. "While he deals in illegal Boomer parts on the side, he runs a legitimate music shop called 'Burn' using his passion for music as a front."

Nene read the sign aloud as Priss came to a stop in front of the shop, located a short distance from Akihabara Station. "Um, Guitar Shop 'Burn'?"

"Well, once you go inside, you'll see it's not an electronics shop. Let's go."

Priss pressed the switch for the automatic door. As she and Nene stepped inside, they were overwhelmed by a heavy bass vibration that shook the very air, a "rough welcome." The wailing sound of a guitar pierced their ears. Nene covered her ears for a moment but immediately reconsidered and let go, looking around with eyes full of curiosity. Her eyes sparkled at the sight of instruments packed into every corner of the shop.

Seeing Nene's excited expression, Priss smiled. "Amazing, right? There isn't a single 'beginner' instrument in this whole place."

"Priss! I saw you on the news, it was intense! Oh, welcome! Are you alright?" A friendly voice called out to Priss from the side. She turned her gaze toward a dark-skinned man and her smile deepened.

"Roberto, it's been a while."

The man called Roberto wiggled his body and gave Priss a wink. "It really has been. Oh? You've brought such a cute friend with you today. What's your name?"

Nene introduced herself with a flash of white teeth. "Nice to meet you! I'm Nene Rokuhara. Pleased to meet you!"

"I'm Roberto Johnson. Call me Bobby. I'm the manager here. Nice to meet you!"

"Nice to meet you, Bobby-chan!"

Priss shrugged and cut to the chase. "Anyway, enough with the self-introductions before you dig a hole for yourself. We're here to buy something for this one today."

Roberto looked at Nene with interest and asked Priss, "Priss plays guitar, but what about this girl?"

"Bass! The thing that goes *thump-thump!*" Nene chimed in. Roberto nodded deeply and pointed to a corner of the shop.

"The basses are over there. The vintage ones are all for sale too, so pick whichever one you like."

Before Priss could stop her, Nene dashed off. Roberto chuckled at the sight. "She's a lively one. Doesn't seem like your usual type of friend at all."

"I only met her the day before yesterday," Priss replied. "It's just a bit of a fluke connection. That's all."

As they spoke, Priss's gaze casually drifted to the wall above the entrance. Her eyes locked onto a white guitar secured to the wall with bolt-on metal fittings. Looking closer, one of the volume knobs on the sharp V-shaped body was strangely large and familiar, and the tuning pegs had a slightly odd shape.

"Looks like you finally noticed that one." Without waiting for Priss to ask, Roberto brought out a wrench from behind the register to remove the guitar from the wall. He skillfully loosened the bolts and lowered the guitar.

"This Randy V has been converted into a 'Robot Guitar.' It's equipped with a Power Tune system adjusted for high-speed micro-reactions specifically for the Floyd Rose tremolo unit, which is usually hard to tune. It even links automatically with the locking nut. The frets have been replaced, and the neck is straight. Operating the tuner is the same as a Dark Fire."

"So it tunes fast even though I can use the whammy bar to my heart's content..."

"More than anything, the design has flair. It suits you perfectly. But what you're worried about is the sound, right? Go ahead, try it out." Roberto confidently encouraged Priss to play.

"With that attitude, it sounds like you're giving it a guarantee before I even try it, right?" Priss cracked her knuckles, clearly eager to play despite her words.

Roberto gestured toward a Marshall amp with his chin. Just then, a cheerful voice they had almost forgotten echoed through the shop. Nene had returned to Priss's side holding a bass and a book. With a smile like she had found treasure, she held up a bass with a sharp, angular shape, a Flying V.

Priss shrugged. For a beginner who was about to start practicing, a Flying V was problematic due to the weight balance, the head tended to dive, and the lack of body contours made it difficult to practice while sitting. *She chose it purely based on looks like a total amateur*, Priss thought.

However, someone else showed a different reaction.

"Ugh, you picked a very rare 'Grandpa' bass... that's a bit..." Roberto groaned with a troubled face.

Nene protested innocently. "Ehh? Bobby-chan, you said anything was fine!"

"I did. But..."

"What's wrong, Bobby?" Priss asked.

Roberto shook his head. "Well, everything in this shop is for sale, but this is an '81 original from a production run that only lasted two years. It's in great condition, so it's expensive... for an amateur to use..."

"No! I want this one!" Seeing Priss and Roberto frowning in hesitation, Nene rubbed her cheek against the Flying V and threw a tantrum.

Priss placed a hand on her forehead and looked at the ceiling. She spoke in a tired tone. "It's too good for you. Pick something else."

Priss stared at Nene with her hands on her hips. Nene hugged the bass guitar as if she would never let go and responded brightly.

"But! If I use this shape, it'll look cooler when I'm singing right next to Priss-chan with one microphone, right? Since our guitars will look alike!"

It actually made a bit of sense, so Priss fell silent. Nene continued.

"I'm going to learn from scratch, right? Since we'll be 'matching,' this will make my motivation go *thump-thump!*" She gave a refreshing smile and held out the book she was carrying. "So please get me this too!"

Priss looked at the book Nene offered and was once again speechless at the reality presented to her. It was a bass textbook. That in itself wasn't strange, but the title was the problem: *'Let's Start a Band! Season 1 ~Starting Bass Slowly~ Beginner Edition.'*

Priss looked up at the ceiling. To have to form a band with such a complete amateur... it was too pathetic. Her pride in her "super-high-school-level" skill and motivation felt shredded. In a fit of half-desperation, she made a definitive slip of the tongue.

"Don't buy that! I'll train you from the ground up!"

"Yay! I love Priss-chan!"

Crap! Priss immediately thought, holding her head, but it was too late.

Nene abruptly followed up. "Priss-chan, you're buying that guitar too, right? Play it! Let me hear it!"

Thanks to Nene's storm-like arrival, Priss was losing her composure. But that troublemaker's words reminded Priss of the task she should be prioritizing.

"Oh, right! Hey, hey, do that thing! The 'tari-lari-lari-lari♪' one! Yeah, 'Stairway to Heaven!'"

Priss pointed toward a corner. "That's impossible."

In the area equipped with several amps and stools for trial plays, a notice was posted on a metal plate with large letters: *'No beginners allowed to play "Stairway to Heaven."'* It also added in small writing: *'Those who play "Smoke on the Water" please leave immediately.'*

Nene, who had been riding high, was discouraged and shrunk back with a small yelp. Priss pulled her shoulders back triumphantly, but Nene puffed out her cheeks in dissatisfaction.

"Anyway, that's how it is, sorry! Heh."

Priss sat on a stool, connected the cable to the amp, and let the guitar ring. She tuned it using the same method as the Dark Fire. The tuner pegs moved smoothly. Playing a few familiar phrases, she felt the sustain and clarity were top-notch, and the neck felt better in her hand than anything else. To be precise, she didn't just think it, she felt it was "dangerous."

Goodbye Gibson Les Paul, hello Jackson Randy V! Priss thought with an excited heart. She felt as if she could see a personified Les Paul waving a sad goodbye.

Just then, powerful drums and a distinctive shout rang out from Roberto's pocket. He frowned and pulled out his smart communicator. Seeing the caller's name, he put the call on hold and spoke to Priss.

"Sorry. Something urgent came up. I'll be away for a bit." He waved and hurried toward the back of the shop.

The owner of "Burn" welcomed Leon and his group, who had entered through the back door, with feigned friendliness. "Long time no see, Leon."

"Yeah. Business booming? Both front and back?" Leon replied. Roberto gave a wry smile.

"You're always like that. So unpleasant."

"Enough of that, just show me already."

Roberto shrugged. He opened the elevator door and stepped inside with Leon and the others. He inserted a card key into a slot in the wall and entered a secret code into the console. The elevator moved downward. There was no basement floor listed on the floor display, it was an illegal construction. Sylva didn't say a single word during the ride.

With a *ping*, the doors opened. There, lined up against the entire wall, were illegal Boomers for sexual companionship. Leon snorted, grimacing at the sight before him. No matter how many times he saw it, he never got used to it.

"Does all of this actually sell?"

"Even this isn't enough. Japanese people are the biggest perverts in the world," the owner of the counterfeit Boomer shop said as if it were someone else's problem. "By the way, who's the boy? Seems he doesn't take a liking to me."

"My partner doesn't think about anything; he's just stiff. Name's Sylva. He's a bit strange, but don't mind him... more importantly."

Leon sat heavily on a casually placed sofa and broached the main subject. "You know about the runaway Boomer incident the day before yesterday, right?"

"Ah, the one that ruined my precious customer's live show."

Leon suddenly remembered the "Beef Croquette Brawl Incident" and continued in a displeased voice. "Customer? Well, if you know, this will be quick. When we checked the remains of that Boomer, what do you think we found?"

As he watched Roberto's expression go silent and guarded, Leon continued. "Technical Standards Conformity number BMX-2032938283. Model number YMS-560N14016SV."

Leon spoke rapidly. Roberto's face changed color. "Wait, what is that?"

"The parts came from your place. Isn't that right?"

Roberto went silent. He went to the product management terminal and began typing on the keyboard to check the ledger. To the puzzled-looking Sylva, Leon explained with a grin.

"This guy acts like a dealer but leaks info to the authorities, he's a real piece of work pretending to be a law-abiding rock fan on the surface."

"The last part is real, take it back!" Roberto's protest was brushed aside as Leon continued. "A stray dog has the stray dog's code. He can't forgive his products being used to threaten 'Love & Peace.' That's how it is."

"That is true. And this is the..."

Just as Roberto was about to remove the chip containing the data from the ledger and hand it to Leon, a low-frequency buzzing hum echoed through the room.

"The startup sound! Look out!"

Leon shouted almost simultaneously as one of the female-type Boomers lunged at them. Leon instinctively fired his large-caliber anti-Boomer handgun. The blast, detonating at point-blank range, proved its destructive power as the female Boomer's head was blown away in a single shot.

However, the runaway Boomer, whose control unit should have been pulverized, did not stop moving.

"Damn it! This thing is the same as that one!"

The bio-machine began incorporating nearby metal and the "companion" Boomers into itself. It started transforming into a monster with numerous arms and legs. Just as its neck twisted at an odd angle, a second, new head sprouted. The Boomer glared straight at Leon with the eyes of its second head, opened its mouth wide in a menacing gesture, and let out a beast-like shriek.

When Leon fired his handgun, the Boomer's jaw was blown off, but it failed to deal significant damage. The monster continued to move as if nothing had happened.

"Tch, you zombie bastard!"

As if mocking Leon's clicking tongue, the Boomer began merging with a safe. Roberto screamed in shock. "This is bad! There's a self-defense gun in there!"

The runaway Boomer's fused gun fired at the same moment Leon tackled Roberto to the ground.

"No, I told you! Use your whole hand, not just the fingertips!"

"Waaah! Teacher, please be gentle!"

Priss felt a headache coming and pressed her temples. It was no surprise that a beginner was a slow learner, but every bit of Nene's delay directly meant a delay for Priss's debut. Just as Priss was starting to regret her optimism, a mistake in operating the mixing console caused a sound like a leaking bass drum to boom from the large speakers, shaking the shop floor.

"What is it? An earthquake?" Nene tilted her head.

Priss responded. "Does an earthquake make a sound like that? Or was it a gas explosion?"

Suddenly, the door at the back of the shop blew open. Three figures tumbled out, Roberto, Leon, and Sylva. Roberto shouted something in English, ignoring Nene's presence. He seemed desperate, but she couldn't make sense of it. Sensing the anomaly, Priss shouted to Leon with her artistically trained voice.

"Hey, 'Big Brother,' what happened?!"

Leon roared back, "Hurry! You guys, get out of here! Nene, move!"

At that instant, a violent vibration caused cracks to run across the floor. Pressure was being forced from below. The concrete bulged and shattered, revealing a dark hole. A moment later, "something" emerged. It was not a living thing; it was a monster with multiple limbs and heads.

"Again?!" Priss's eyes widened.

Her voice was drowned out by a blast. Priss instinctively looked toward the source of the roar and saw Leon leveling his anti-Boomer pistol. He fired heroically. As if triggered by the shot, the runaway Boomer let out a creaking scream and began moving toward Leon.

Priss realized what she had to do. Dragging Nene, who was clutching the bass, she grabbed her Randy V and ran toward the exit.

"Go to hell, you monster!" Leon's roar and a sound like a frantic drum solo echoed behind them. The battlefield music of an armed detective and a rampaging Boomer.

They didn't have the luxury of looking back. Priss pulled Nene through the stacks of instruments and burst out of the open automatic doors. Pedestrians stopped to see what the

commotion was about. Once they were a safe distance away, Priss looked back at the entrance. The sound of gunfire grew louder. A few moments later, Leon appeared, backing out of the shop.

"Don't stop! Run! Go!"

Almost simultaneously, the walls of "Burn" collapsed as flames erupted. The runaway Boomer emerged from the wreckage. It exhaled a low breath, glared at the armed detective, and let out a beast-like, high-pitched shriek that echoed through the streets.

The startled pedestrians began to run. Chaos ensued as they scrambled to escape in all directions. Leon shouted something as Sylva tried to take control of the scene, but it seemed impossible to stop the panic.

"The 'Burn' is burning down!!" Nene cried, half-sobbing as she watched the shop collapse.

However, Priss saw an opportunity in the crisis. In this situation, everyone would be too busy running to care if a mysterious "hero of justice" appeared. She operated her communicator and called Sylia. A few agonizing seconds passed.

"Hey, can you see this?! It's a runaway Boomer!" Priss shouted into the camera.

"This is Sylia. Hello."

"I already know. Linna should be arriving at your location shortly."

"Then this is simple. Give me my Hard Suit while you're at it. I'm going to fight!"

Sylia's calm voice crackled back. "Negative. I cannot authorize your participation in combat. Someone who doesn't know how to use it would just be a sturdy, useless puppet. You must evacuate immediately."

"What did you say?!" Priss couldn't believe her ears.

Sylia's voice sounded irritated. "Escape quickly. The AD Police elite should be there. Leave the civilian evacuation to them."

Priss looked back at the street. She saw the citizens fleeing from the rampaging Boomer. She clicked her tongue. *(If I don't fight, these people will...)*

"It's an order! Escape now!"

"Shut up, you idiot! I'm an Edokko (child of Tokyo)! I can't just walk away! What kind of 'hero of justice' would I be?!" Priss screamed back, cutting the transmission before Sylia could say another word.

"I'm going to use that."

She decided to stop the Boomer using only her "Dress Suit", the under-suit provided by Sylia as a buffer and interface for the Hard Suit. If she couldn't act here, she wasn't worth being a Knight Saber. She called out to her comrade.

"Nene, let's go! ...Nene?"

Nene stood frozen, eyes wide and face pale with terror. Her shoulders shook as she clutched the bass. She wasn't just unable to fight; she could barely even stand. Priss realized the cause, the memory of being attacked by a Boomer must still be vivid in Nene's mind.

That's right... she's still just a high schooler. Priss bit her lip. Expecting her to overcome that fear now was too much.

"Guard my 'V' for me... I'm counting on you!" Priss pushed her Randy V into Nene's arms. Leaving the huddled Nene behind, she ran behind a building. After confirming no one was around, she took a deep breath and shouted the command word to blow away her anxiety.

"Battle Command: Transform ON!"



A pale blue light enveloped the area. A flash seared Leon's eyes, followed by a roar that shook his eardrums. *Continuous fire from an anti-Boomer gun isn't good for the body*, he thought somewhere in his brain. *Do I get worker's comp if my eyes or ears get damaged?*

He ignored the thought and kept pulling the trigger, ignoring his remaining ammo. The gun roared, tearing mechanical parts from the Boomer. The bio-machine let out a shriek humans couldn't understand and aimed a mass of cables at Leon. Seeing what was at the tip, he dove behind building debris. With a *thud*, concrete fragments scattered. Buckshot.

"Whew!" He let out a breath. That was close. If he hadn't known the Boomer had incorporated firearms, he'd be dead. He switched the safety and pulled out the magazine; only one round left. He couldn't afford to waste shots. He slammed in his last full magazine. A heavy metallic click echoed. Fifteen rounds of anti-Boomer ammo. This was it.

Leon looked back. He saw Sylva shouting and guiding civilians. *If only he were allowed to carry a gun...*

He had no time for "what-ifs." The Boomer fired again, chipping more concrete. "Damn it!" Leon leaned out and fired. A shot like distant thunder blew away the gun attached to the Boomer's tentacle. Oil or blood sprayed out. The machine writhed in pain.

"Serves you right." Leon smirked. Okay, the long-range weapons were neutralized. Now, if the evacuation just went well.

His optimism was short-lived. The Boomer picked up a large piece of debris, tested its weight, and threw it with a scream of compressed air.

"A throwing attack? Ancient tactics?!" Leon balled himself up. A dull, massive sound echoed as the debris hit his cover, shaking the ground. *This is bad*. This Boomer was smart enough to use tools. It had more "wisdom" than the last one. He'd be cornered soon.

Suddenly, things went quiet. The attacks had stopped. Puzzled, he peeked over the debris and saw a new figure, a small, black shadow compared to the Boomer.

It was a delicate woman in a black gothic-lolita dress with a veil over her face and frilled fabric fluttering. To Leon's shock, she was violently punching and kicking the Boomer.

"Wait, is that what Priss Asagiri was talking about? But it's supposed to be armored... not something unnecessarily stylish." He watched the black shadow fight.

<HYAH!>

Priss's electronically processed voice rang out. Despite her elegant appearance, her fighting style was heroic. She threw a right straight with a piercing shout. The Boomer reeled back.

Priss felt a sense of satisfaction. She hadn't trusted this "Dress Suit" at first, it looked like a black European noblewoman's mourning dress with frills, ribbons, and black stockings. It seemed ridiculous to think it was for combat. But this was the Knight Sabers' "Type-I Equipment." Made of shape-memory fibers and superconductive pigments, it could change appearance instantly.

It amplified the wearer's power and speed. The Boomer groaned and stepped back. Priss smirked under her veil. *The Dress Suit isn't half bad!*

The Dress Suit was only the "under-suit" for the Type-II Hard Suit. Its protection and power were less than a tenth of the full armor. But it was enough for now. Priss closed the distance, overwhelming the Boomer with speed to make up for the lack of mass.

<GET BLOWN AWAY!>

She threw a full-power right straight. The Boomer's torso buckled with a sound like a DJ scratching a record. But it recovered instantly and glared at her with its inorganic face. She was dealing damage, but she lacked a "finishing move" to hit its weak point.

Priss kicked the Boomer with all her might. Oil sprayed, and the metal skeleton bent, but the monster didn't fall. It swung an arm, but she dodged with a light step. The monster lost its balance. She wound up her right hand and punched with her whole weight.

<YOU BASTARD!>

Her voice echoed through Akihabara. She was toying with the Boomer, but it wouldn't go down. The recovery rate was higher than her attack power. To make matters worse, the Boomer began merging with nearby metal to heal.

And among those things, "This is bad," Leon groaned.

The Boomer incorporated a car from the street, growing even larger. Its tires began to spin. It had gained mobility. If it escaped into the city, they couldn't use heavy weapons without risking civilian lives. Leon gripped his gun. *I have to take a gamble.*

At that moment, the sound of a bowstring being released echoed. On a roof three blocks away, a figure stood against the sun. *Thud!* A metal arrow flying at the speed of sound impaled the Boomer into the asphalt. More arrows followed, stitching the machine to the road.

As the monster was pinned, Sylva tore a subterranean power cable from the ground and thrust it against the Boomer. Millions of volts surged through it. Even a Boomer couldn't survive that.

"Sylva! You idiot, stop!"

Leon thought he saw the investigative Boomer smile for a second. Then, Sylva and the runaway Boomer were enveloped in a blinding arc of light. The Boomer's organic parts evaporated, and its death cry echoed through the buildings. The smell of burning chemicals filled the air as it finally ceased functioning.

Leon didn't care about the Boomer. He ran to his charred partner. "Sylva! Hey! Sylva!"

Sylva moved. His eyes flickered through the smoke. He tried to speak, but no sound came out. Leon pulled his partner up and held him tight.

Priss watched the scene in shock. Sylva was charred but alive. Even without seeing the cables protruding from his torso, it was obvious, he was a Boomer. No one but a bio-machine could survive a million-volt shock.

Priss was overwhelmed by the men's life-or-death struggle. She stared, half-dazed, as Leon embraced his partner and wept like a man who had lost everything.

<Now is the chance. Please disappear while you still can.>

Suddenly, an electronically processed voice echoed nearby. She turned her head. Linna, clad in her Hard Suit, stood there. It was she who had been firing the great bow from the rooftop. Thinking Priss hadn't heard her, Linna repeated herself.

<The scene is in chaos. Please disappear now.>

<But where to...>

The Hard Suit's head tilted, a nod.

<This way. Please follow me.>

Linna's suit kicked off the ground. She danced gracefully through the air, landing on a building's rooftop. Priss cast one last glance at Sylva, hesitated for a moment, and then followed after Linna.

Priss and Nene, having escaped the scene, were now at a nearby maid cafe managed by Linna. There were no other customers. In the darkness, the shop, lit only by candles, looked hauntingly fantastic. Priss took a sip of the tea Linna had brewed and let out a soft sigh.

"The main power lines seem to have been taken out," Linna muttered in response to that sigh.

Priss bit her lip. That was it. The shop was dim not for atmosphere, but because of the massive blackout hitting all of Akihabara. She remembered Sylva, charred black, tearing out the cables. It was the result of an act by a Boomer who was more human than humans.

"Um, this place is... wait a second." Nene turned and asked Linna, "Linna-chan, where exactly is this?"

"This is the maid cafe 'Triple☆A.' It's near Kanda."

Priss glanced to her right. Nene was talking into her smart communicator, informing her family of her safety. The relay functions for mobile communications had already been restored by emergency power. Priss had already finished her own call. Gozo had cut the line after leaving her with the words: "Protect Nene-chan, even if it kills you." Gozo always said that life only had meaning if you protected others. Priss understood the meaning well. However, that wasn't why she protected Nene.

Nene was the bassist for the band, a comrade in the "Knight Sabers", she didn't need Gozo to tell her. Above all, Nene was her friend.

"Yeah, I got it. See ya."

Nene cut the call. Priss spoke up. "Was that your brother?"

"Yeah. ...He said he's too busy to come pick me up."

"I see."

Priss saw Nene's shoulders trembling. She smiled gently and pulled her junior into an embrace. Nene leaned her head against Priss's shoulder, looking comforted.

The door of Triple☆A rattled. Someone was using a spare key. Priss let go of Nene and approached the door.

"Wait up, I'm opening it now."

The moment Priss spoke, the door opened roughly. In the lightless street, the shadows of a girl and a middle-aged man appeared. It was Sylia and Meiei.

"You! Honestly!" Sylia said the moment she stepped inside. "Why did you ignore instructions and fight while still in your under-suit?"

Being lectured right off the bat made Priss grimace. She had expected something from Sylia's personality, but she hadn't expected this immediate frontal assault. She spoke in an utterly displeased tone.

"Who cares? I'm safe, aren't I?"

"If you die, the suit I went through the trouble of adjusting goes to waste. Do you understand? That is an expensive piece of equipment."

"Is it a matter of money?! Hey!"

"I hate the idea of things going to waste, be it money or your life!"

Sylia scolded Priss fiercely. "Why didn't you run? If you had escaped sooner, I wouldn't have had to worry so much."

Having heard enough, Priss shouted emotionally. "How could I run in that situation? Besides..."

"Stop this."

A seasoned woman's voice rang out. It was a dignified, strong voice, well-practiced in commanding others. An elderly woman dressed in a formal Victorian maid outfit emerged from the back of the shop.

"Kimie-san."

"Kimie-san? Who's that?"

Linna answered Priss's question. "She is my grandmother. And..."

"I suppose you could say I am something like Sylia-san's guardian," Kimie Sakakibara said pleasantly. "By a slight stroke of fate, I sponsor the venture tech company where Sylia-san serves as owner. I am also supporting the Knight Sabers that Sylia-san organized."

Kimie directed a sharp gaze toward Sylia. "Sylia-san. What exactly is your relationship with Priss-san?"

"That would be... as a member of the Knight Sabers..."

"And the band?" Kimie asked Sylia. She then turned her gaze to Nene and smiled gently. Then, she spoke in a tone that was both kind and stern. "Yes, that's how it is."

The two of them faltered at her tone. The atmosphere was not one where they could talk back. Kimie closed her eyes. When she opened them, she spoke.

"Sylia-san. Did you not welcome Priss-san as a comrade, rather than a subordinate? Correct?"

".....That is... true."

"Then what is with that high-handed way of speaking? If you are comrades, act like it."

Sylia dropped her head. She spoke in a faint voice. "Yes."

Seeing this, Priss let one side of her mouth curl up. *Serves her right. Tell her more.*

Her time as a mere spectator ended there. Kimie turned toward Priss. The old woman looked straight into Priss's eyes.

"Priss-san. You are no better. You lack manners entirely. You are certainly overreacting to Sylia-san, but that is not all. You must learn a bit of decorum yourself."

Priss was overwhelmed by her. Within that quiet demeanor was a strength like a mountain, a different kind of strength from the one her adoptive father radiated. Priss nodded solemnly.

The tense air surrounding Kimie relaxed slightly. She smiled softly. Priss and Sylia followed suit with smiles of their own. Kimie cleared her throat and straightened her posture.

"I have heard about the band from Linna. She is a clumsy granddaughter, but please, guide her well."

Kimie bowed her head to Priss. Priss was shocked by her sincere attitude. *Is this that "the riper the rice, the lower it hangs its head" thing?* Priss remembered the phrase she had just learned in her Modern Japanese class yesterday. She had thought it was gibberish, but sometimes these things were useful.

Priss nodded vigorously and thumped her chest. She spoke with all the energy she could muster.

"Leave it to me!"

Leon was in a dim place. As a building, it was large enough, but because of the various machines crammed into it, the available space was small. And the cramped space could hardly be called comfortable; it smelled of dust and mold. Leon muttered while looking with disgust at the oil stains on instruments of unknown purpose.

"Hey, you should clean up a bit more. This is terrible no matter how you look at it."

"It can't be helped. I don't use this place much."

The owner of the place, Roberto, grimaced. He continued to argue with pouting lips. "This is my second workshop. Since it's the second, it's only natural that the treatment is a bit rough."

Leon shrugged. He looked left and right in a theatrical manner. "Up until now, maybe. From now on, this is the first workshop. Let's take better care of it."

".....Well, true. It looks like it would be a good idea to do a major cleaning next time."

"The instrument shop in Akiba is trashed too. You've got time, right?"

"You say that so easily. That was a huge loss for me, in terms of rock's cultural heritage." Roberto glared up at Leon.

Leon grinned. "Then, you want to go out of business? I'll help you out. I'll slap the cuffs on you right now."

"That's not fair."

"Then clear off that desk a bit. I can't put this guy down."

Leon was wearing a sturdy, giant backpack used by special forces. Inside the bag he shook lightly was the charred Sylva. The investigative Boomer poked out his burnt neck and said in a faltering tone:

"Leon-san... please, don't do anything reckless... I am....."

Leon spoke while tilting his neck. "Don't be stupid. What do you think would happen if I took you back like this? What kind of face would I have to show, saying 'I'm the moron who broke his partner in a single day?'"

He peered further back. Sylva's neck was bent backward, and Leon couldn't see his expression. Leon gave up on seeing Sylva's face and spoke jokingly.

"I wouldn't have enough report forms in the world to cover this. I'd be fired for sure."

"However, for you to... perform repairs... is reckless."

"Even so, try taking it to Headquarters or Chofu. If I send you for repairs, they'll definitely ask for the cause. If that happens, you, who acted on your own, will be treated as defective and undoubtedly scrapped. Am I wrong?"

"There was no choice in that situation, was there?" The black-market dealer cut in while clearing the desk. "If this boy hadn't torn out the underground power cables, what do you think would have happened to you?"

"Well, I'd probably have gotten a double-rank promotion. My family's pension would be solid too; not bad." Leon twisted his lips.

Roberto shrugged. "Too bad you lost the chance for a promotion... There, I've cleared it."

"Shut up. Either way, this guy went too far."

Leon set down the backpack. The sound of a zipper opening echoed in the warehouse. He carefully placed the charred Sylva onto the repair table. He looked down at the half-destroyed investigative Boomer and spoke accusingly.

"Why did you do that? To say it was 'unavoidable in that situation' is going way too far. Your 'program' should know that much, shouldn't it?"

"I am... programmed to prioritize... protecting your life above all else. That includes a command that says... 'Regulations... can... eat... crap.'"

"Who the hell was it? The idiot who typed in such a stupid code?"

"It does... not... remain in... my memory."

"It's like an instinct or a memory from a past life. Well, I suppose that makes sense."

Even while talking, his hands didn't stop. As expected of a former engineering student and a lover of mechanics, he performed the repairs skillfully. The shop owner, looking at the materials and parts used in Sylva, spoke up.

"This thing is impressive. It's the Rolls-Royce of Boomers."

"Rolls is BMW. I prefer Maybach... Alright, that's it."

Leon took a breath. With a smile on his lips, he re-seated the biological logic board into Sylva's internal section. A moment later, a *vroom* sound echoed in the room. It was the sound of the main unit rebooting. Sylva exhaled deeply. Sylva's self-repair function had been restored. He would be fine now. Leon leaned against the wall and waited for the moment. And then...

"I owe you one now," Sylva said. His voice was much brighter than the tired tone from before.

Chapter 5: Stand and Fight!

Homeroom ended, and the teacher bowed. In the next instant, Priss Asagiri charged toward the stairs with a force that would make a World Athletics gold medalist hurriedly give way. In her basketball shoes, she ran all the way down to the first floor, a living space for first-year students. On the way, she heard a teacher's loud shout, but the sound was distorted and she couldn't tell what was being said. It was likely the Doppler effect or something.

Don't let the target escape! That thought alone was the principle driving Priss as she charged without looking aside.

"Class C!"

Finding the class sign protruding from the wall into the hallway, she grinned. The second-year with the wolf-cut hair locked onto her target, skidding her basketball shoes into a drift down the hallway. Upon opening the classroom door, Priss searched for the target's form. Confirming she was still there, her cheeks relaxed slightly. She spoke in a sweet, coaxing voice, as if gently soothing a child.

"Nene-chaaan. Let's go to practice. Practice."

The classmates remaining in the room turned toward the door with a start. When the students identified the intruder, they all shrugged in unison. When Nene's classmates first learned she had started a band, they were shocked. If it was the band of the famous Priss-senpai, it was hard to believe.

Priss moved behind the girl. Nene was looking at her fingertips and sighing. Her fingertips were probably getting calloused.

"Do your fingers hurt?" Priss asked. Feeling that she was starting to look the part, Priss couldn't help but grin.

"They hurt. Priss-chan is so mean~"

Nene was muttering while looking at her fingers, but she suddenly looked up. She said in a bright voice, "I remembered! Today is half-price cream puff day at 'Patisserie Milano.' Priss-chan, let's go together... Huh? Priss-chan?"

Priss grabbed Nene by both armpits and hoisted her up. Having captured Nene, Priss threw her into the Bentley limousine waiting at the school gate. No one in the school found this strange anymore. It was a scene that had been repeated every day for the past week.

"Caught you!"

Meiei drove the Bentley limousine toward the practice studio. Nene didn't seem to immediately understand what had happened to her; she looked dazed for a moment and then flailed her limbs. She looked up at Priss and raised a voice of protest.

"I let my guard down! To catch me so suddenly, Priss-chan, that's cheating! You coward!"

"Give it up. Practice, practice, nothing but practice!"

At Priss's urging, Nene threw a tantrum, refusing to give in until the end. "No, no, I don't want to practice! Not today, my TV horoscope was the absolute worst!"

"I see. Then it's an unavoidable fate."

"Waaaah, Priss-chan is a kidnapper! I'm being abducted!!"

"Shut it! Don't say things that sound so bad."

Ignoring the commotion, the students of Class 1-C continued their preparations to go home. To them, this was already a commonplace occurrence.

Priss poured herself a mouthful of coffee into her own mug. The sedan's six quiet, high-output motors didn't vibrate, so there wasn't even enough time to finish a cup of coffee. Taking a breath, Priss turned to Nene and spoke.

"Do you hate practice?"

"It's not that I hate it..." Nene was fixed in place by a safety bar so she couldn't escape. She hesitated, swinging her legs. "It's just, how should I say, it's difficult..."

Nene tilted her head with a strained laugh. Priss spoke in a soft smile, as if teaching her a lesson.

"Endure it for now. You'll cross the wall soon. Once you get over it, your hands will move on their own."

"Is that how it is...?"

At Nene's half-hearted agreement, Priss gave her a guarantee. "Yeah, it'll be fine. It'll move as smoothly as when you type on your smart communicator."

"Nene only uses voice input, though."

An awkward silence filled the car.

"We will arrive at 'Gently Weeps' soon. Please prepare yourselves." Meiei's low, calm voice echoed through the car, announcing their arrival at the practice studio.

The practice studio "Gently Weeps" had a basement. It was originally a normal music studio near the music cafe "Moby Dick," and Priss's video, which had garnered millions of hits, had been filmed here. However, because there was no space to park a Bentley limousine nearby and it was a perfect place for the four plus one of them to meet in secret, Sylia had bought up the surrounding land, buildings, and management rights when they formed the band, and performed a major renovation.

At first glance, it gave the impression of a luxurious music studio with a slightly large parking lot. But the secret of the renovation was underground. She had remodeled the facility exactly to her specifications. Aside from the commercial studio on the ground level, she had installed a spacious and well-equipped practice area exclusively for them in the basement, and below that floor, she had built the second base for the Knight Sabers. Furthermore, she had even installed a secret underground passage leading from "Moby Dick."

Sylia had completed this renovation work in just five days. Today was the first day of practice using this studio.

"So much money," Priss muttered as she walked down the stairs from the back entrance to the basement studio, guitar on her shoulder. Sylia, walking ahead of Priss, spoke to her.

"Did you say something?"

Priss shrugged, feigning ignorance. "Nah, nothing. Just that I don't really get how rich people think. By the way, why are you wearing that even during practice?"

Sylia, in her spirited Gothic Lolita outfit, replied calmly. "This is my everyday wear. It is what makes me feel most at ease."

"Oh, is that so? How elegant."

While spitting out that sarcasm, Priss opened the door. Beyond the window of a small room with a large mixing console, a large space opened up. She saw equipment lined up: large stack amps, keyboards, a drum set, and microphones. It was on par with a recording studio. The underground space must have been expanded even under the parking area.

A girl who had arrived earlier greeted Priss and the others with a smile. Linna was not in her usual maid outfit, but in a black jersey with gold lines. She held a 3D video camera in one hand. She intended to capture the first practice on film.

"I've been waiting for you. Preparations are complete."

"Sorry for making you wait, it was this one." Priss poked Nene. It was a usual occurrence.

"Then I'll go change into my everyday clothes!" Priss said with her palms up, stretching and psyching herself up.

As band practice, they were scheduled to do their first group session today. Sylia's keyboard playing was perfect. From her years of piano experience, she quickly grasped the knack of songs even in different genres. Since her knowledge of computers was perfect, she mastered the operation of DTM software in no time. Linna's drumming was also better than average for a beginner. It was the result of her innate seriousness and her silent, double-effort practice.

The problem was, after all, the practice-hating member who had to be taught the basics of handling an instrument from scratch. But Nene was shouting with excitement at the luxury of the studio she was visiting for the first time.

"Amazing! It's like a professional artist's!"

Priss, who had finished changing into a hoodie and denim shorts, chimed in. "Well, we started the band on the promise of becoming pros. You too."

".....Hey, hey, this amp is huge! Priss-chan, play something! Play!" Nene begged Priss for a demonstration, as if other people's words didn't reach her ears at all.

"Your practice comes first, you idiot..." While grumbling, Priss briskly plugged the cable into the amp. In truth, she herself felt more than satisfied excitement at the studio environment.

Once ready to play, she plucked the strings of her beloved Randy V to tune it. When Priss played a few phrases to warm up, a real Marshall amp tone, different from the simulated ones, rang out at high volume. Priss was intoxicated by the alluringly loud sound she had produced.

"Priss-chan, you're so cool!"

Pleased by Nene's cheers, Priss turned to her with a smile and spoke. "You know this song, right?"

Priss played a high-speed guitar solo phrase, making full use of arm-downs, choking (bending strings), and tapping (striking strings on the frets).

"Awooo!" Nene reacted with a smile, but another voice chimed in from the side.

"Wao, Michael! Indeed." Meiei whistled and showed his praise for Priss's play.

Nene began to back away with shaky steps. She seemed to intend to do a moonwalk, but no matter how one looked at it, it resembled a desperate escape scene after witnessing a reptile or something.

"It's impossible."

The head of the Second Investigation Division grimaced at the somewhat flat voice coming from the side. "Could you say that again? What exactly is impossible?"

"I cannot imagine a transaction of precision parts taking place in such a location." Sylva slowly looked around and then turned his face to the division head. "The air contains salt from the sea. The amount of dust is also higher than in urban areas."

"Just like a Boomer," one of the subordinates who read the division head's expression whispered lowly. The investigative Boomer ignored him and continued. He spoke as if only he and the man he was addressing existed in the room.

"The environment is also far too poor. The port facilities, especially the gantry cranes and lighting, emit a large amount of electromagnetic noise."

"Certainly, that would be a major problem for you. But for humans, it isn't much of a problem. You will likely never understand that."

Laughter filled the room at the division head's words. They had no experience investigating with an investigative Boomer. Leon and Sylva were desperate to track down the factory for mass-producing runaway Boomers. However, there was far too little information to serve as a clue. They were completely stuck.

Hoping to gain even a little information, they attended a joint meeting with another investigation team chasing the same case. There, they were told of some "top-tier information." Because Sylva argued against that information, the detectives snapped at him.

Leon clicked his tongue. *What do these guys think my partner is?* Just as he was about to open his mouth to offer some sarcasm, Sylva stopped him with a hand. He spoke to the division head.

"Furthermore, high electromagnetic noise inhibits ESM, Electronic Support Measures, functions. In such an environment, even if a trap were set, it could not be evaded."

"Are you saying you lack the confidence to evade a trap?" the division head asked.

Leon replied in his stead. "No. He's just saying that in the event of an emergency, we wouldn't be able to prevent it."

"That isn't true. Besides..."

"He's saying this transaction is a trap," Leon said, cutting off the division head, unable to take it anymore.

At those final words, the man's cheeks relaxed. "It's alright, Leon-kun. There is no possibility of that. This transaction is absolutely real. Even if a bullet train were to fly through the sky, no accident would occur here."

"What is the basis for that reasoning? According to my calculations, if the wear rate of parts by opening a case and checking the product in a place where the air hasn't been cleaned is correct..."

"Sylva..."

"I understand you're concerned about the quality preservation of the 'product.'" Someone chimed in from the side. It was a member of the Second Division famous for being disliked. The corners of the man's mouth curled in a nasty way as he continued. "After all, for Sylva-kun, it's the innards of a fellow kind."

Sylva tilted his head as if he didn't understand the irony. Seeing that exchange, Leon slammed the desk violently and said as if shouting:

"You bastard, do you have any idea how many decades of your salary it would take to buy an expensive item like my partner?"

"Both of you, restrain yourselves. We are in the middle of an investigation meeting." The division head scolded them. Leon glared at the man. The man clicked his tongue softly and fell silent. Leon took a light breath to compose himself, raised his hand, and asked for permission to speak.

After confirming the division head's nod, Leon spoke. "The dealers who can no longer trade illegal parts due to the commotion in Akihabara are desperate. The time interval since that incident is too short. It's too soon."

"Leon-kun, do you not know?"

"Know what?"

At Leon's answer, the division head twisted his lips. "The prestige of the police has hit rock bottom due to the daily commotion. Do you not understand the pain of being on the receiving end of the demand to 'do something quickly?'"

"Can't you just let them talk? Our role is..."

"The purpose is not to maintain the prestige or face of the police. We have a duty to respond to critical public opinion that 'the police are not fulfilling their role of protecting the safety of the citizens.' There have even been victims among the citizens. The higher-ups at headquarters are furious."

Leon fell silent at the division head's words. He understood the feeling of wanting to use any information as a clue if it meant preventing further damage.

"But the transaction location this time is not Tokyo Port, but Yokosuka Port in Kanagawa Prefecture. What about cooperation with the Kanagawa Prefectural Police?"

"I've conveyed it for the sake of urgency. We've notified them for now, but there's no time to wait for their cooperation. If the transaction is real, we would miss the criminals right before our eyes. We would be exposing the citizens to danger."

After a pause, the division head ordered everyone:

"Therefore, this time we will not coordinate with the Kanagawa Prefectural Police. In this case, we will conduct the crackdown alone."

"I apologize for the interruption during practice. This is an emergency."

The studio door opened, and Meiei's baritone voice echoed. Nene, who had been jumping around with her bass, stopped her movement. Sylia, standing before the vintage Fender Rhodes piano, asked Meiei:

"How uncouth. What is the matter?"

"We have received internal information that the AD Police will move regarding a black-market Boomer transaction," Meiei replied in a calm voice, his expression unchanged.

Priss cast a glance at Sylia. Sylia nodded back. She then asked Meiei again:

"Tell me the place and time."

"It is said to be today at dusk. The location is a container pier in Yokosuka City, Kanagawa Prefecture."

Priss wore a suspicious expression at that information. Linna captured Meiei's information.

"Someone in the police is using our company's 'prototype.' The 'prototype' has a real-time transmission function built in that even the user doesn't know about." She said this and nodded to Priss.

"Does that mean..." *Is it about Nene's brother's partner?* Priss swallowed those words and remained silent.

There were many orphans due to Boomer accidents; Priss herself was one. She had also heard that Nene's biological parents had likely died in a Boomer rampage accident. The police didn't investigate Boomer accidents very seriously. It was a hotbed of vested interests involving the police, and there was political pressure not to affect Boomer manufacturing, which had become a core industry. Because they used Boomers, there were many cases where they were a mass of high technology and the true cause was unknown.

Sylia furrowed her brow. Meiei nodded in agreement.

"It seems to be as Milady infers. For this kind of transaction, one would normally assume the worst-case scenario. The location is unnatural."

"What do you mean?" Priss asked, looking between Meiei and Sylia.

Linna replied to Priss's question.

"For a criminal, the worst-case scenario is arrest. A professional criminal prepares so they can escape at any time to prevent that. And amateurs do not get involved in the black-market Boomer trade."

"The AD Police have been framed."

Nene reacted to those words. "Big brother...!" She took a small breath and whispered worriedly.

Priss exchanged glances with Linna and looked at Sylia. She nodded and spoke in a dignified voice.

"Everyone. Let's begin preparations immediately. The Knight Sabers are deploying!"

The sun sank toward the west. The sun began to dye Sagami Bay red. A large black truck, as if in response to the creeping night, slid into a container yard on reclaimed land just north of Yokosuka Port.

The truck proceeded through the valley of containers without hesitation. A pitch-black shadow moved through the metal boxes of various colors stacked as high as a small building.

The procession stopped. A security guard wearing a glowing vest signaled with his hand. He lightly swung the baton light in his left hand, bringing the truck to a stop. The huge and

intimidating truck showed no sign of resisting the guard's instructions and stopped quietly. It waited silently for the arm lowered before its eyes to rise.

A forklift loaded with a large container passed in front of the guard and the truck. The high-output motor hummed, and the forklift vanished from sight. After confirming the passage, the guard leaned out slightly to check for safety on both sides. He turned back toward the truck and lightly moved the edge of his helmet up and down with his right hand. He was likely conveying his gratitude for following his instructions.

"Go ahead," the guard said briefly. He lightly rotated the baton light in his left hand to urge the start. After a short honk, the truck moved forward smoothly. The guard bowed slightly. While the truck passed, the guard continued to rotate the baton light with a practiced motion. The pitch-black form turned the corner and vanished from his sight.

The guard immediately gripped the collar of his uniform with his right hand. He spoke in a suppressed voice.

"This is Vocal. The customer who bought a ticket has entered the house."

His words were compressed and encrypted within a small radio behind his collar, and released into the void as a weak burst of radio waves on a nanosecond scale.

<Base understood. We've confirmed it here on camera too.>

Base, that was the response from the general headquarters. The bone-conduction speaker built into his helmet vibrated his eardrums. The guard waited for the next words with tension.

<Vocal, seal it off.>

"Understood."

The guard's face tightened at the expected words. The real show began here.

The guard, Leon Rokuhara, swung the baton light in his left hand in a wide motion. The large forklift that had passed earlier moved backward with its reverse lights on. The forklift silenced the reverse warning horn it would normally sound and slid backward. Eventually, it slowed down according to the movement of the baton light Leon was swinging, turned its body, and stopped.

The sound of hydraulic cylinders echoed quietly. The loaded container was lowered. The container was set so as to block the passage of the truck that had passed earlier. Seeing that finished, the forklift began to move backward soundlessly, just as before. It was not the movement of a normal forklift. It was ignoring safety.

Leon lightly waved his right hand to Sylva, who was operating the forklift. Sylva moved both hands, drawing a large circle over his head. Leon nodded and gripped his collar.

<This is Vocal, sealing complete.>

Leon ran toward the container. Into Leon's ears as he ran soundlessly, a voice echoed from the bone-conduction speaker.

<From Base to all units. Drum is to follow the original plan...>

"Will it go well?"

At Sylva's question, Leon shrugged. "Who knows."

There, he stopped his words and looked around. The sea leading to the outer world, the creeping darkness of night, and the port. It was perfectly suited for a suspicious transaction. That was why he was certain it was a trap. The problem was what kind of trap it was.

Suddenly, the roar of a beast echoed from the direction where the truck had vanished. The two exchanged sharp glances. They ran with all their might.

There was a pool of blood around the black truck. Leon realized that the ambush squad that had been waiting had been wiped out. In that sea of blood stood a Boomer of a truly strange appearance.

The Boomer, which could be called a half-man, half-tiger, attacked the moment it saw Leon. Sylva immediately shielded him and pushed Leon away. In exchange, the skin layer of his body, along with his clothes, was scraped away. But heedless of that, Sylva challenged the Boomer to protect Leon. Leon covered his attack with gunfire.

However, a human-form Leon and a Boomer specialized for combat were no match.

"Kishaaaaa!"

The Boomer, letting out a strange cry, swung its sharp claws. Sylva took the force of the swing with both arms. No, it looked as though he had taken it. Oil spurted from both of Sylva's arms. In the next moment, after what sounded like something snapping, both of those arms fell to the ground.

"Sylva, are you okay?!" Leon shouted.

Sylva shouted back. "Leon-san! Escape!"

It was the first time Sylva had used an imperative word toward him. Sylva continued.

"I will...here..."

The tiger-man Boomer's fists sank into Sylva's torso. The investigative Boomer spat a translucent liquid from his mouth, his expression twisting.

"Sylva!"

"GUOOOOOOOON!"

It was the combat Boomer that responded to Leon's voice. The tiger-man's arms, thrust into the investigative Boomer's abdominal cavity, bulged. The monster opened its arms with all its might. Sylva's torso was torn open.

"Kyaha!"

Sylva's body was torn in two, and he fell miserably onto the Yokosuka pier. The tiger-man opened its arms wide and let out a roar of victory toward the heavens.

Leon didn't miss that he had left an opening. He dragged only Sylva's upper half and tried to escape from the tiger-man. Sylva said in a raspy voice:

"That Boomer's target... seems to be you, Leon-san. I am no longer a threat... I am fine now. Please escape without worry."

"You idiot, what if you're kicked into the sea?! How can I leave my partner behind?!" Leon shouted. Besides, realistically, even if he abandoned Sylva, escaping was nearly impossible.

The Boomer he faced was a complete combat-specialized type. Both power and speed were on a different level from previous runaway Boomers. Even if he abandoned Sylva and ran, he would be caught in no time.

Leon looked back. The Boomer bared its teeth. A mixture of oil, blood, and saliva dripped from its irregular teeth. The biological machine opened its massive jaws and roared.

Leon immediately readied his gun and aimed at its mouth. It was his last anti-Boomer round.

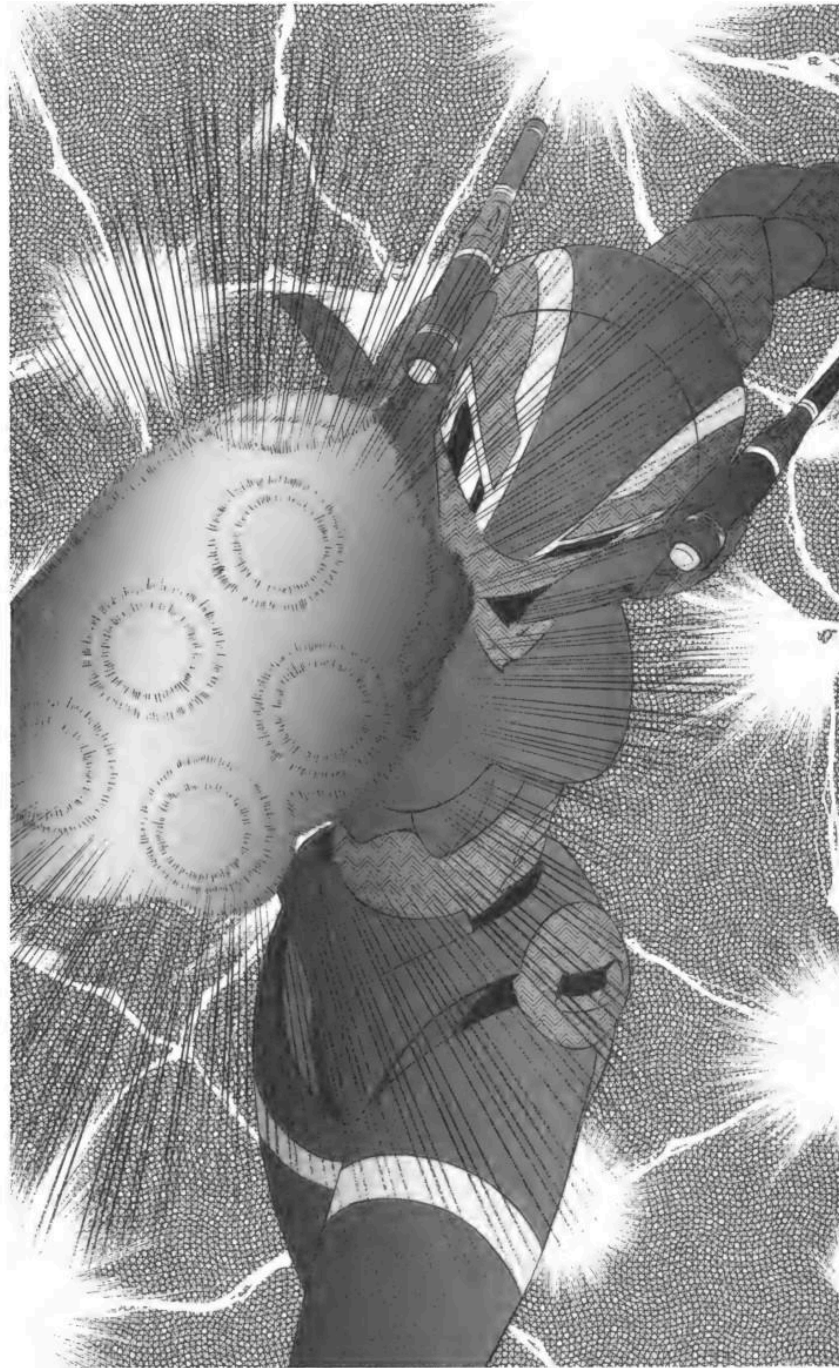
The Boomer's biological machine mouth twisted hideously. It was the smile of a carnivore. The combat Boomer deepened its strange smile.

Priss quickly crouched to escape the line of fire. Leon pulled the trigger. Sparks hit a container with a high-pitched metallic sound.

(My life was surprisingly short, wasn't it? I wonder if Nene can live alone?) Even so, he attempted a final resistance. He picked up a fallen iron pipe and held it at his side.

The biological machine beast raised its sharp claws. Priss thought calmly that it would surely kill its prey. At that moment, it put strength into its hind legs and leaped all at once.

Suddenly, the Boomer's form vanished. Leon, who didn't know what had happened, looked around. There, he witnessed a scene for the second time in his life. The same armored warrior he had seen in Akihabara had punched the Boomer away. Leon's eyes widened. This time there wasn't just one. There were four in total.



Two of the suits attacked the tiger-man furiously. Another one approached him and Sylva. An electronically processed voice echoed.

<For now. Come, please hold on.>

"What are you guys?"

Leon asked while holding onto the shoulder, passing Sylva over first. From the external form and voice, it was a woman.

<We are the Knight Sabers.>

"Knight... what?"

<Quiet. You'll bite your tongue.>

The armored warrior informed him with a soft electronic sound. Leon obeyed quietly. At the same time he closed his mouth, the Hard Suit kicked off the ground. The Hard Suit, carrying one person and a half-body, soared into the air with a certain composure and left the area.

Leon looked down from the sky as the Knight Sabers challenged the combat Boomer.

Mason narrowed his eyes at the forms of the armored warriors as seen from the sky. He was watching the battle from Marunouchi. The footage was from an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle, UAV, flying over Yokosuka.

At the UAV's altitude, voices could not be heard. However, from the occasional explosions and sparks, he could tell that a fierce battle had begun between the armored warriors and the combat Boomer. The battlefield would be filled with rough sounds.

He leaned the Les Paul Custom he was holding against a guitar stand nearby and sat on the leather sofa.

"As I thought, this detective seems to have been the key."

He snapped his fingers. Another small 3D monitor activated. This was also footage from above. Judging from the noise similar to the large 3D monitor, it was likely footage from another UAV. But it wasn't Yokosuka. It seemed to be some town.

Mason waved his index finger. The image was enlarged, and a certain area was shown in a large shot. It seemed to be in front of a station with a shopping district. Mason waved his index finger again, more slowly this time. The image was enlarged further, and a building near "Gently Weeps" was shown in a large shot. A blue light appeared in the air.

Mason called up a spatial projection keyboard. He operated the keyboard and checked the UAV records. There were no records of Priss Asagiri and her bandmates leaving this building. He carefully scrutinized the data. But the results were the same no matter how many times he looked. The data obtained from there showed that they were in the middle of a lesson.

"Targeting this detective was the correct answer."

Mason, feeling relief at his judgment, muttered to himself and wore a smile. He continued in a tone as if confessing a sin.

"I didn't want to have to do something like erasing Priss Asagiri." At least, for now, not yet.

Mason swallowed those words. She was, after all, a human. Eventually, she was a being who should be managed by us. But for now, if a rocker lost that independent spirit, they would be as good as dead.

Mason stroked the Les Paul placed beside him and returned his interest to the 3D footage.

The Hard Suit's foot sank into the combat Boomer's face. The Boomer's face twisted in agony.

<There!>

Priss shouted, intoxicated by the sensation of her left foot crushing metal.

<Alright!>

Priss, having landed a high kick, shouted. It was perfect. Her body moved more than she had thought. It was likely because the Hard Suit was specialized for close-quarters combat according to her fighting style.

The Hard Suit newly made for Priss. Amidst the scent of brand-new reinforced plastic and wax, she relaxed her cheeks with satisfaction. It was a world of difference from the previous battle. Now she could understand the meaning of Sylia's words that fighting in a dress suit was ridiculous. The combat power was on a completely different level between a dress suit and a Hard Suit. It was foolish to even compare them.

Feeling the power surging through her whole body, Priss shouted.

<Go for it!>

While shouting, she threw a right straight with all her might. Into the right fist that had been relaxed until just before, the Boomer's left cheek exploded. The punch, with an

ultra-vibration bit built into the fist, crushed the armor. She put strength in only at the moment of impact. A heavy sensation was transmitted to her hand.

"Uguo!"

Even so, the tiger-man's fighting spirit did not fade. It extended its right arm and tried to grab her torso as if to crush it. Priss grabbed the monster's head with her right hand. Using her right arm as a pillar, she rotated her body in the air and swung her legs. Through her right hand, she could feel the neck of the Boomer whose head she had grabbed give a *crack*.

"Grrrrrrr!"

The muscles in the Boomer's shoulders bulged. It raised both arms and brought them down all at once. Sylia was at their end. Sylia, holding her long sword, was pushed back and slammed into a container.

<What are you doing, crouching there!>

Her body moved before her words. Priss's legs kicked the asphalt. Her extended legs became a blade and sank into the neck of the Boomer that had pushed Sylia.

"Nogoal!"

The Boomer, having taken the jump-kick, threw its neck back. In that time, Sylia regained her stance. She had no intention of wasting the chance Priss had created.

<Hiyaaa!>

Sylia swept her sword with a shout that could split the air. The sound of a clear blade cut through the wind. The Boomer let out a cry of agony, holding its left arm. It convulsed as if to grab its left arm.

The left arm had been severed above the elbow. The biological machine arm had fallen onto the concrete.

The half-man, half-tiger Boomer stared at its lost left arm with a face of disbelief. A vicious rage appeared on its face. Heedless of the mixture of oil and artificial blood overflowing from the cut surface of its left arm, the combat...

The biological machine let out a roar. "GOAAAAAAH!" Priss heard the blood-curdling scream with total composure. To her, it wasn't a cry of rage; it was a voice meant to embolden itself and hide its own terror. Her eyes met the Boomer's. Priss grew more certain of the color she saw in the tiger-man's savage eyes: an instinctive dread of being struck down by a superior force. She tucked her chin. In terms of both spirit and combat power, she was far above it.

However, the real challenge was just beginning. She could not hold back, for a single moment of carelessness would lead to a swift and certain death.

The Boomer crouched low, rounding its back and fixing a piercing glare on Priss. Its eyes were simple and clear, filled only with the intent to kill. The biological machine's pupils narrowed, and the muscles in its thighs bulged. In the next instant, it released its hidden physical strength all at once, attempting to close the distance to Priss.

Linna's great bow was waiting for that exact moment. With a heavy *thrum*, an arrow exceeding the speed of sound was unleashed. A special metal spike pierced the Boomer's thigh. The Boomer tried to pull the arrow out with its left hand, but another arrow struck that very arm.

"NOGOAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

<It's over!>

<Justice is served!>

The Boomer groaned in agony, shaking its head violently and glaring toward the direction the arrows had come from. Now was the time. Priss balled her fists. She wound up with all her might and shouted. With a heavy *thud*, her fist sank into the Boomer's torso. Simultaneously, the special equipment built into the tip of the Hard Suit released its power.

It was an anti-Boomer trump card: a warhead filled with a synthetic chemical substance designed to disrupt a Boomer's nervous system. Known as the "Silver Bullet," it was a round developed by Sylia, who held the secrets of "aGEED" technology. With this, all nervous activity in the Boomer was inhibited, rendering its combat effectiveness almost nil. The Boomer groaned soundlessly; even the nerves required to produce sound had been ravaged by the Silver Bullet. The combat biological machine stopped moving entirely.

Linna's great bow rained down upon its body. Arrows struck the Boomer one after another, in the torso, the back, the legs, the hands, and the head. Sylia stood soundlessly behind the Boomer. She raised her rapier high and shouted. A white blade flashed along with her voice. The tiger-head of the combat Boomer flew through the air. The headless Boomer collapsed forward.

<We did it!> Priss shouted. The severed head of the Boomer vanished into the sea with a splash.

"I've been completely beaten," Mason said aloud. Contrary to his words, there was no sign of frustration. In fact, he had expected this much. They had destroyed two precious runaway Boomers that were the fruits of his research; if they couldn't manage at least that much, they wouldn't be worth his time.

He enlarged the 3D image. The already grainy footage became even noisier. Within the enlarged image, the back of the Boomer, which had been turned into a pin cushion before being decapitated, moved slightly. Seeing this, Mason muttered with amusement. This was where the real show began.

"By all means, do be careful."

He placed his Les Paul on his lap and struck a single chord. A dissonant sound echoed through the room.

The Boomer's back bulged eerily. The atmosphere, which had begun to relax, tightened once again. Linna shouted in a tense voice.

<Watch out! Something is coming out!>

Just as she warned, something small burst out, tearing through the Boomer's back. It was about twenty centimeters tall. It was roughly humanoid, but it couldn't have been more hideous. It had a hairy body, a small head, and short limbs. With rounded triangular ears, bat-like wings, and a tail pointed like an arrow, its appearance was almost comical. At first glance, it looked like a winged kitten, if not for the clear hatred shining in its small, dark eyes.

The kitten let out a high-pitched "meow-meow" and leaped around the motionless Boomer. Occasionally, it looked up at the Knight Sabers with spite, baring its teeth in a hiss.

<What is this thing?!> Priss shouted. Even Linna was taken aback, staring blankly at the flying kitten. Sylia snorted, finding the situation absurd.

<Whatever it is, anything born from the enemy is an enemy!>

With those words, Sylia swung her rapier. The kitten's shadow grew smaller as it fluttered into the air to gain altitude. It spread its wings and took flight, dodging the rapier. The shadow neared a crane on the pier.

<Linna!>

At Sylia's voice, Linna snapped back to her senses. It was very hard to see, but she drew her great bow and took aim.

<No, no way!>

The small shadow merged with the crane. It didn't hide in the shadows; it took the metal into itself.

<Fu... fusion?> Priss muttered. It felt like she was watching a scene from a bad sci-fi movie. She felt her throat go dry. In that time, the Boomer's body sank into the body of the crane. Most of its form was now integrated.

<What kind of technology is this? Intermolecular fusion? Or non-exothermic metal mixing?> Linna spoke her thoughts aloud in a voice too loud to be a mutter.

<I don't care what it is! This thing is...!> Sylia snapped.

The Boomer's form vanished completely into the crane's body. The crane shuddered. In the next instant, the jib bulged into a sphere, and liquefied metal flowed downward. The body dented with a strange noise. The bulletproof glass windows, unable to withstand the transformation, cracked and shattered into pieces.

The crane shuddered again, more violently than before. The melted metal formed a humanoid silhouette. Emerging from within was the face of the small Boomer that had just taken flight. Having integrated with the crane and grown to a gargantuan size, the Boomer glared at the Knight Sabers with eyes full of hatred. The Boomer shook its massive body and screamed. A jarring high-frequency sound echoed, and Priss instinctively covered her ears.

Linna readied her great bow. She pulled it back to its limit and released it. A roar that shook the air thundered through the container yard. The special metal arrow raced through the sky at three times the speed of sound and pierced the giant Boomer's eye. The Boomer immediately let out a scream.

We can do this! It's just big, it's weak to pain! Just as Priss thought this and prepared to dash, the sound of a crane wire swinging passed over her head. Priss ducked to dodge it.

The Boomer's attack was relentless. It swung the wire, striking the ground with the claws at the end. A direct hit would surely cause massive damage. However, its accuracy was lacking; the wire struck empty ground as well. Priss smirked.

<A big man with no...>

She couldn't finish her sentence. The crane's claws bulged, and Priss's eyes widened at what grew from them. Nearly ten metal arms appeared. At their tips were machine guns, grenade launchers, and cluster rocket packs.

Priss finally realized the Boomer's intent. It had likely been absorbing the equipment of the AD Police; the ones who had been lying on the ground it was striking earlier. She gnashed her

teeth and looked up at the giant Boomer. Seeing its form, Sylia thought calmly that it looked like a high-tech Indian Buddha statue armed with modern firearms.

<Scatter!>

The rockets on the Boomer's arms spat fire almost the same moment Sylia shouted. The weapons, built to slaughter armored vehicles on the battlefield, functioned exactly the same way in this corner of the Yokosuka container yard. Rockets pierced through containers in plumes of plasma fire.

The three Knight Sabers, including Sylia, were overwhelmed by the giant Boomer. The rockets also hit the AD Police vehicles left in the yard, destroying them one by one. Nene, who was just an ordinary high school student, was completely terrified. Flames and blast waves erupted from the heavy vehicles that should have been able to withstand a Boomer's charge, sending them flying through the air like kicked tin cans.

Priss took the brunt of a blast and was blown away, slammed against the side of a container. She used her willpower to hold onto her consciousness, which felt like it was drifting to the edge of the universe, and shook her head.

<Priss! Are you okay?> Sylia's voice echoed from the receiver.

<It hurts a bit,> Priss answered honestly. It had been a long time since she had been hurt this badly. She stood up, leaning her weight against the container, and exhaled sharply.

The runaway machine, looking like a half-man, half-vehicle centaur, creaked its massive frame and swung its arms. It fired indiscriminately without aiming, destroying everything around it. Priss hid in the shadows and licked her lips. This was getting dangerous.

Nene's legs felt like lead. This was too much. Her role in this mission was supposed to be evacuating her brother and Sylva to safety. She didn't have innate talent like Priss, nor combat training like Sylia or Linna. Being a perfectly ordinary high school girl, that was the only role she could play in her debut.

Even if it was a boring role for a "Hero of Justice" debut, Nene had accepted it. She had wanted to join the Knight Sabers to help Leon, and she had been able to do that right away. Nene had performed her task gladly, transporting the two of them away on a Motoslave and insisting on secrecy.

But when she returned, this was what she saw. A Boomer, more vicious than anything she could imagine, was raking the area with guns and rockets. Containers were shattered, cars

crushed, and the ground split open. Fires were starting everywhere, and the container yard was being swallowed by flames. It was a war zone.

Nene realized she had underestimated being a "Hero of Justice." They might be heroes, but it wasn't glamorous. It was a gritty business of facing dark, hideous things. An explosion sounded, and Nene instinctively cowered. She wanted to turn her back on the scene.

Just then, Priss's voice came over the communicator. Nene's back stiffened. She turned back slowly, like a scolded child. The Hard Suit slowly emerged from the wreckage of a container. It made a gesture as if shaking its head. A transmission from Sylia came in.

<This is nothing. It's a perfectly good massage.>

<You're really fired up, aren't you?>

<Of course, Priss. My creed is that defeat is impossible.>

<What a coincidence, mine too. Anyway, let's finish this before Nene gets back.>

<Indeed. Linna!>

<Yes!>

With those words, Linna fired an arrow. It flew straight and tore off one of the giant Boomer's arms. The Boomer groaned, its whole body trembling. Nene instinctively covered her ears.

<ALRIGHTTTTT!>

Priss's roar echoed. One Hard Suit burst forward, heading straight for the giant Boomer. The Boomer swung its massive arm, but Priss dropped to the ground and dodged the blow. Nene bit her lip. *That's right. I can do it too!*

She took a deep breath. Using the abdominal breathing she had just been taught, she shouted from her gut.

<TEYAAAAAAH!>

The voice couldn't be called brave by any stretch of the imagination, but it was given with her whole soul. How did she look to the other Knight Sabers?

Hearing the voice, Priss searched for Nene. She found her immediately; among the rising flames, a Hard Suit was running with a somewhat wobbly gait. Even so, Priss knew Nene was squeezing out every bit of her courage. For an ordinary high school girl, perhaps even less than that, it wasn't hard to imagine how difficult this was.

Yet, Nene ran. With the AI assist of the Hard Suit, she skillfully dodged the Boomer's attacks and stood beside Priss. Priss patted Nene on the head through the suit.

<You made it, Nene.>

<Priss-chan, stop that! I'm not a kid!>

<My bad, my bad.> Priss's smile deepened at Nene's protest. Now all four Knight Sabers were together. She felt like they couldn't lose. Priss looked at Nene.

<We're going with "Synchro." Can you do it?>

<.....Yeah. I'll try.> After saying that, Nene shook her head. She spoke in a trembling but strong voice. <No, I won't just "try." I have to do it!>

The Hard Suit's head turned toward Priss and gave a big nod. Priss reached out to pat the head again but stopped herself. She couldn't treat a comrade fighting beside her like a child.

<Alright, let's go.> Priss nodded. They had practiced it a few times, but this would be the first time using it in actual combat. She took a deep breath and commanded the suit. <Battle Command: "Synchro Mode" ON!>

A small shock rattled the Hard Suit. Priss and Nene's suits linked, entering a mode where they performed the same movements.

<Nene, keep up!>

As soon as she said it, she dashed straight toward the giant Boomer. In Synchro Mode, her movements became the primary; if she made an unnecessary move, she would force that move on Nene too. Priss and Nene became one. They leaped over containers, dodged wires, and ran through flames. Their movements were identical, like a mirror image, without a single tremor.

The giant Boomer was toyed with by their movements. The swinging wires and striking arms were all evaded. The biological machine let out a massive, frustrated roar. The sound of an arrow cutting through the air echoed, and a metal spike sprouted from the Crane-Boomer. Linna was firing her great bow to support Priss and Nene's charge.

The Boomer, distracted by the bow, swung a wire. The wire, exceeding the speed of sound as it whipped from the arm, attacked Linna.

<I found you!>

Priss shouted. A dignified flash cut through the wire; Sylia had protected Linna. At that moment, Priss discovered a trace of the original Boomer: a small part of the kitten's face

remained there. The two of them dived into the Boomer's heart. Nene remembered the words she had been taught for this moment and shouted into the voice recognition device.

<Battle Command: "Black Crystal" ON!>

The extraction device built only into Nene's suit activated. It refined a single molecular material from her genetic structure and encased it in light.

<Do it, Nene!> Priss's scream echoed in the helmet. Nene nodded and shouted even louder than before.

<Battle Command: "Black Spear" ON!>

Those words were the signal. Nene's suit ejected the Black Spear from its fist. The Black Spear, having penetrated deep into the Boomer's body, rapidly reorganized the surrounding nanomachines.

<TORYAAAA!>

<TEYAAAAA!>

The two shouts overlapped. Priss's powerful fist crushed the armor, and Nene's fist pierced through the gap into the Boomer itself.

<Finish it!> Sylia's voice echoed in Nene's helmet.

The Boomer's sinister armor peeled away. It was beginning to collapse from the inside. Nene's eyes met the kitten-faced Boomer. The Boomer, which should have been raging and exhausting itself in destruction, had strangely kind eyes. It was as if a possession had been lifted. Realizing this, Nene whispered so quietly that no one would notice.

<Bye-bye. If you're reborn, let's be friends.>

To Nene, it looked as though the crumbling Boomer gave a smile. It continued to collapse, turning into a pile of oil-stained iron wreckage.

Mason watched the scene from far above. The Boomer was collapsing in agony for an unknown reason. He wanted to hear its death rattle, to find some clue as to what had happened. But it was simply rotting and self-destructing.

"This is...!"

It hadn't been destroyed by force, nor was its thought unit crushed. Mason peered into the 3D monitor once more. There was no mistake: the combat Boomer was vanishing, melting away

on its own. He stared at the monitor, aghast. He knew of only one technology that could cause a Boomer to self-destruct. He muttered in a voice like a whistle.

"The B-Crystal... still exists?"

The Black Crystal Object. It was a Boomer technology thought to have been lost long ago. The technology system Genom currently possessed was based on the White Crystal Object (W-Crystal). W-Crystals and B-Crystals had catastrophic effects on each other. Upon learning this, Mason had secretly murdered the researchers studying B-Crystals. Years had passed since then. Unless a miracle occurred, the technology should never have been revived.

Mason was stunned by the shock racing through his body. The Les Paul Custom he had been clutching fell to the floor with a thud. He rounded his back and stared at the floor. The shock passed. His slumped back began to move with small tremors. The movement grew larger, until finally, Mason began to laugh loudly. His laughter echoed through the empty floor.

After a while, he picked up the Les Paul. He stroked the surface and laid it on the leather sofa. He looked up at the ceiling with a bitter smile.

"So, God has thrust the Sword of Damocles at me."

His words echoed hollowly on the top floor of the only building in Marunouchi. He looked at the 3D monitor. The armored warriors were nodding to one another and beginning to leap away, likely returning to their base. His innate rationality ordered him to track them. His intellect agreed. He should track them, or perhaps launch a pursuit; he could wipe them all out now.

After a moment of hesitation, he decided to follow his emotions. Mason snapped his fingers. The image from the 3D monitor distorted and then cut out; the UAV with the camera had self-destructed. His smile deepened. The world had too many uncertainties. But...

"This is it. This is the only way to enjoy this world as a 'created thing.'"

He snapped his fingers again. The lowered blinds rose, and the brilliant moon and the glamorous night of Tokyo illuminated him from above and below. Mason moved his well-proportioned, tall frame elegantly and began walking toward the window, the Les Paul gripped in his hand. He looked at the eastern sky. The waning moon had begun to shimmer with a white, mysterious glow.

Epilogue: The Man on the Silver Mountain

"Linna-chan, these muffins are delicious!"

Nene's bright, bouncy voice echoed in the underground practice studio of Gently Weeps. The members of the Knight Sabers were enjoying tea time after a practice session. Priss had chosen a classic punk song for their first assignment. Nene seemed satisfied with her own performance, as her expression was bright. On an oak table in a corner of the vast studio sat tea and sweets prepared by Linna. Nene had played the characteristic reggae-style bassline better than Priss had feared.

Linna, praised for her homemade muffins, replied with a clear smile.

"Really, these are great. Honestly, I thought the maid outfit was just for business, but this is the work of a true professional." After saying that, Priss stuffed a muffin into her mouth and smiled while chewing.

"Thank you. It was worth making them."

Nene suddenly stretched out her hand toward the muffin in front of Linna. "I'll have another one!"

"Hey, that's Linna's portion!" Priss scolded her, but Linna stopped her with a smile.

"It's fine, Nene-san, please. I'm happier seeing them enjoyed."

Priss shrugged and looked at Sylia. "I can only really make curry. Can you and Nene actually make anything?"

Nene answered immediately without a care. "Nene can make natto on rice with an egg. It's big brother's favorite!"

Sylia's eyes wandered as she gracefully set down her cup. "I... well, you see... um... so to speak..."

"Milady. It might be better to just admit what you cannot do," Meiei added with a smile.

"Linna's baking skills are at a pastry-chef level. Her mille-feuille and bûche de Noël are also exquisite."

"So the squirt can't even cook," Meiei remarked in his deep baritone. Sylia glared at him, looking embarrassed.

Marunouchi at night had few pedestrians. For a district filled with office buildings, this was only natural. It hadn't changed since the 20th century; once night fell, people rarely passed through, despite being next to Ginza. However, in the 2030s, the quality of the Marunouchi night had changed slightly. Something about the cream-colored, glowing Genom Tower, illuminated by countless searchlights, appealed to human instinct: *Do not approach here at night.*

In that illuminated pyramid, one man was moving his body to a heavy sound. Mason Quincy, the president of Genom Corporation, was on the top floor. Standing before a giant mirror, he threw a sharp right high kick from a pose with his heels slightly raised. He spun around, leaned his upper body forward, and placed a hand on his head in a gesture like holding a hat.

It seems I share the same sense as Priss Asagiri.

He was impressed. Mason had been inspired by the footage of her practice uploaded to the net and was listening to a legendary artist's music for the first time in a long while. At first, he listened quietly, but he couldn't help but move. Having danced through a legendary live performance, he marveled at the original artist, a once-in-a-generation genius. And Priss Asagiri, who had reminded him of it, was surely one as well.

He shook his hair to the music, shouting and jumping. Occasionally, he gestured as if throwing a hat or pointed a finger at the mirror as he moved around the vast room. For several songs, he didn't stop. He performed a moonwalk as smooth as a machine, heels slightly raised.

Finally, the equivalent of a full live set ended. He closed his eyes. He raised both hands high, legs crossed. Mason shivered as if overcome with emotion. In his mind's eye, he could clearly see the audience in Bucharest fainting one after another. Mason opened his eyes with satisfaction. He wiped the sweat from his forehead with a towel, picked up a bottle of sports drink adjusted specifically for him, and took a sip.

He smiled. Priss was human, but when his wish was granted, eventually...

Mason approached the windows on all four sides. The lights outside were few, except for Akihabara to the north. The ancient "Electric Town" was still suffering from the aftermath of the blackout he had orchestrated.

He thought of the mysterious armored warriors. He crossed his arms, towel draped around his neck. They had taken down his runaway Boomers at the Live House, in Akihabara, and in Yokosuka. He had collected information from the net, surveillance devices, Boomers, and

humans alike. No matter what route he used, there were no sightings outside of those three times.

Therefore, those armored warriors were hostile only to him, to Genom and the Boomers. This was clear even from their possession of B-Crystal technology. (*They appeared specifically to challenge us,*) he told himself.

Mason turned his back on Akihabara. He took a bottle of bourbon from a counter in the corner of the room and poured it into a Baccarat glass. He downed it in one go, sighing as the pleasant burn traveled down his throat. He nodded to himself in the empty office.

Whenever that detective was in a crisis, the armored warriors appeared. If that was the case, he could set a trap again. He would need a more cautious plan, but it wasn't impossible. Mason let out a long sigh and tilted the bottle again. He suddenly thought of the legendary equipment buried under the building that had collapsed during the rampage.

He looked back at Akihabara. The Electric Town was still dark.

The End